

Ashes To Ashes, Dust To Dust by gbriee

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Summary: Set in 1987, Mike and Eleven are sixteen and more in love than ever before. They have their whole future ahead of them - or so they thought, until an unfortunate event sends El to the hospital, where her doctor discovers an anomaly that might change their lives forever. (Spoiler: I'm a sucker for happy endings y'all.)

1. Chapter 1

Welcome to my story! I really hope you enjoy it :)

A few disclaimers...

- 1) I do not own Stranger Things, nor am I affiliated with it in any way.
- 2) There is SOME Mileven lemon, seeing as this story is set in 1987 and Mike and Eleven are sixteen. Nothing tasteless, just your coming-of-age, first-time experience kind of lemon. So if you're uncomfortable with that, you shouldn't read on.
- 3) My profile pic is a Mileven manip I created last year, when I still had my fan account on Instagram (used to be forevermileven.) If you want it, DM me and I'll send it to you!

That's it you guys! I hope you enjoy :)

CHAPTER 1

"I'm scared of EVERYTHING. I'm scared of what I saw, I'm scared of what I did, of who I am, and most of all I'm scared of walking out of this room and never feeling the rest of my whole life the way I feel..." Baby makes a slight pause. "...when I'm with you."

Eleven let out a small gasp as she reached for another handful of popcorn, not tearing her eyes away from *Dirty Dancing*. The one positive about working the late evening shift at a movie theatre was that she could attend the final 10 p.m. showing. It was the summer of 1987, and sixteen-year-old Eleven Hopper was working part time at Starcourt Mall's movie theatre, alongside her boyfriend - Mike Wheeler.

El loved action and romance movies the most. Her least favourite kind were the cheesy comedies. A few months ago, she had fallen asleep during *Three Men And A Baby* and had to be shaken awake by a pair of customers who wanted a refill of root beer, which her boss,

Frankie, had threatened to fire her for. Since then, Eleven always made sure to snack on candy before the last movie started, hoping the sugar rush would keep her awake during the last hours of her shift.

Eleven's thoughts drifted to four days ago, when she and Mike had both worked the same Monday closing shift. It'd been one of the first warm, sunny days of the summer, which had translated into a very slow shift at the movie theatre. However Eleven didn't mind, as it meant she and Mike could use the spare time to play cards and study for their final exams instead of serving customers. By 9:30 pm the movie theatre was completely empty. So they'd closed up shop and stayed at work to catch the 10 pm showing of *Robocop*, all to themselves. The movie had been out for a week and they were both dying to see it.

Unfortunately, most of the movie remained a blur to El, as she and Mike had spent the whole time making out. They were interrupted during the end credits by the janitor, who El recognized from school as Dave Connolly. He was a year older than they were, a junior-going-on-senior at Hawkins High.

"S-s-sorry," he stammered, looking away and awkwardly slamming his head against the door as he tried to back out of the room. Eleven glowered at Dave, internally cursing at him for interrupting.

"Let's go home," said Mike, rising from his aisle seat and offering a hand to El. "We can uh.. finish what we started." He was wearing her favourite shy, boyish smile, his big brown eyes boring down into hers. El wanted nothing more than to keep kissing him, to keep exploring his body with her hands... just thinking about it made her insides churn. She took his hand willingly.

Unfortunately, when they arrived at the Wheeler residence, Mike's parents were in the middle of a huge fight. Karen had thrown a glass candle holder at Ted, and Ted was bleeding and cursing at Karen, holding up an ice pack to his forehead.

"Sweetheart, I don't think tonight is a good night for Jane to stay over," Karen said to Mike, pulling him aside as he and El walked through the front door. *Jane* was Eleven's official name on her birth

register. However, she'd only found out about her real name three years ago, and the name never really stuck with her or any of her close friends. The only people that ever called her Jane were Mike's parents and his older sister Nancy, who was back in Hawkins for the summer after finishing her second year of college in New York.

"But you agreed to it this morning," Mike responded flatly.

"Yeah, well things change, son. And don't talk back to your mother," grumbled Ted as he sat down in his favorite lazyboy, muttering to himself as he clicked on the T.V.

So Mike pretended to say good night to Eleven, kissing her goodnight and showing her to the door. He glared at his mother as he passed her, and made his way up the stairs to his room, where El was waiting for him cross-legged at the foot of his bed. This was their ritual on week nights, since they were both technically allowed to have sleepovers during the weekend only (except during in the summer.) However, their parents' rules would not keep them apart. They had spent a single night together since their reunion in the fall of 1984. If staying over at Eleven's for the night, Mike would easily climb through her window (the Hopper-Buyers' house only had one story), and if they slept over at Mike's, Eleven would use her psychokinetic abilities to levitate to Mike's second floor bedroom (all the while being careful not to be spotted by the neighbours, of course.) Mike couldn't wait for the day of his eighteenth birthday, when he would finally move out, have his own place, and Eleven could sleepover as often as she'd want - without having to ask permission or sneak around.

After brushing their teeth, they changed into their pj's, and as per usual, Eleven slipped into one of Mike's t-shirts. His shirts were worn, comfortable, and smelled like him, which was an added bonus. It was unbelievable how tall Mike had grown in the last three years. He was now just shy of 6 feet tall, and from the top of her own mere 5 feet 4 inches, Eleven had to crane her neck just to look at him, and get on her tippy toes to kiss him, but she didn't mind - on the contrary, she quite liked it.

Mike turned off the light and sighed as he lay down on his bed next to El, pulling her body closer to him. "Sorry for the mood kill,"

whispered Mike. "I shouldn't have brought you here. It's gotten worse this past week. I really wish they would just get a divorce already. It's pretty clear they don't love each other anymore. I told her so a few days ago."

Eleven considered this for a moment. "I think they're staying together for you, Nancy, and Holly."

Mike sighed in frustration. "Well, they don't have to. I prefer them being separated than them fighting like this all the time. I mean - Nancy and I don't care, but it's bad for Holly. She's 7, she doesn't understand."

"I know."

"You know what she said to me, the other day, when I told her it was obvious they weren't in love anymore? She told me I was only sixteen, what did I know about love," Mike scoffed angrily.

Eleven found herself surprised that this comment actually hurt her. This was Karen Wheeler, who probably hadn't been kissed or touched by her husband in the last 6 years. Her opinion on the subject of love was therefore completely invalid.

"What did you tell her?" whispered El.

"That age had nothing to do with it. I told her it was all about luck. Finding that person in the universe - YOUR person - that completely understands you, and accepts who for you you are, and loves you for it. Like... the girl version of you. A reflection of your own self within that other person, and you just... connect without even trying, you know."

Eleven did know. She looked into Mike's eyes and knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Well, I found my person." Mike smiled at El as he pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "And I think she's just jealous she hasn't found hers yet."

Eleven smiled at him and rested her face against the palm of Mike's hand. "I love you, Mike."

"I love you more, El," Mike responded, and kissed her. She kissed him back passionately, wondering how it could be possible that she still felt the same butterflies in her stomach as she did the first time he ever kissed her, back in the cafeteria of Hawkins Middle School, the same fateful night their whole world fell apart.

Mike's hand moved to back of her head, gently grasping her hair as he turned on his side to face her directly. He kissed her neck, then moved to her collarbone, then, boldly, went to kiss the valley between her breasts. She moaned into Mike's ear, overcome with desire. Mike came back up to silence her with a kiss, placing one hand on the small of her back, then slowly moved it down to her butt, until he reached her leg and brought it over so their bodies would intertwine. Eleven thought her heart would burst. They kissed and kissed as she explored his naked back with her hands and grabbed his butt firmly, pressing his crotch area close to her own. She let out a small gasp when she felt his erection poke her gently through his boxers. It was the first time she had ever felt his penis.

She looked into Mike's eyes and they were a question, searching her own for validation that she was okay with it. *How chivalrous of him*, she thought.

"I can't help it, I'm sorry," he whispered.

El placed a hand on his face and gently stroked his cheek with her thumb. "It's okay. I want to," she whispered back.

Mike's eyes went wide. He propped himself up on his elbow and looked down to face her. "Seriously?"

"Yeah." They just stared at each other for a moment, smiling like crazy.

Mike rolled over in a flash and flicked on the lamp, rummaging through his nightstand drawer. El knew what he was looking for. She lay on her back, her heart racing, anticipating what was coming next. The great unknown.

"So we're really doing this?" he asked again to be certain, condom in hand.

"We're doing this."

Mike beamed. "Okay." He studied the rubber briefly. "Oh crap..."

El sat up, alarmed. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Mike looked deflated. "The expiry date says 03/86"

El was baffled. "What? Don't these things last forever? How long have you had it for?"

Mike had a sheepish look on his face. "Lucas gave it to me freshman year..."

El rolled her eyes. Why the hell did Lucas need condoms in the 7th grade to begin with? "Of course he did," she replied flatly. They lay in silence for a minute.

"Hey, it's okay. I'll just get more," offered Mike gently. "We'll do it soon. Not tonight, but soon, I promise."

Eleven offered him a small smile. She couldn't hide her disappointment.

Mike pressed a hand to her cheek. "El, trust me - I'm bummed too. There's nothing else in the world I want more than to finally make love to you."

With this, El perked up. Mike always knew how to say the right things to make her feel better.

"Me, too," she whispered. He smiled and kissed her before turning around and shutting off the lamp.

"Dance with me..."

Eleven was pulled from her thoughts as *Dirty Dancing* continued in real time. Baby moves towards Johnny. Their bodies press together as they begin to sway. Eleven reached for another handful of popcorn, watching them, captivated by their sensuality. Johnny moves his hand under Baby's left hamstring, elevating her leg. They move, in sync. Johnny places his hand on Baby's lower back as he dips her

down to the ground. Eleven was fascinated. She had never seen two people dance like this in real life. Baby walks around Johnny, slowly, softly pressing her lips against his back. Eventually, Baby returns to face Johnny and raises her arms. Johnny removes her shirt. Eleven continued to stare at the screen, mesmerized. It was so beautiful and romantic.

Her thoughts returned to Mike and how close they had come to *actually doing it* four days ago. Just thinking about it made her insides churn, a tingling warm sensation building at the bottom of her stomach. She was ready. She wanted to give herself to him, fully, just as she wanted all of him in return.

Tomorrow was her day off. She would go to the mall and buy some cute underwear, something sexy that Mike would go crazy for. Plus, her parents were away for the weekend to attend Jim's niece's wedding in Chicago. She would have the house to herself since her adoptive brothers, Will and Jonathan, had left for Indianapolis to spend the summer with their Dad, Lonnie. Lonnie had not always been a good father, but ever since Will had gone missing four years ago, he had genuinely stepped up and was now very present in his sons lives, despite living at a two-hour drive from Hawkins. The timing couldn't be more perfect.

She was going to have sex with Mike tomorrow night, and nothing was going to stop her.

2. Chapter 2

CHAPTER 2

Eleven woke up to the sound of the doorbell ringing.

"Honey! Michael's here!" yelled Joyce Byers, her adoptive mother. El glanced at her alarm clock. It was 10h30. She had slept like a rock and hadn't heard Mike get up and leave through the window - their customary morning routine. By the time El had made her way downstairs, Mike was sitting at the kitchen table with Joyce, a plate of eggs and toast before him.

"Morning," said Mike, smiling up at El.

"Hey," she replied, taking a seat beside him. They joined hands under the table.

"Would you like some coffee, Michael?" asked Joyce, coffee pot in hand as she fixed up El's breakfast plate.

"No thank you, Mrs. Buyers. I don't drink coffee," declined Mike politely.

"Right! Oh, you all look so grown up now. I almost forget you guys are still kids." Joyce shook her head frantically, pouring coffee for herself and prying the fridge door open with her foot, reaching for the orange juice. Joyce Byers was only really Joyce Byers if she was doing five things at the same time, all the while looking completely overwhelmed.

"Do you mind if I sit with you guys for a second while I have my breakfast? I have to go to work soon."

"Of course," said El, pulling a chair back for Joyce as she took her seat, placing Eleven's plate in front of her.

"Thanks, Mom."

"No problem, sweetheart." Joyce smiled brightly at Eleven and squeezed her hand affectionately. They sat in silence for a few

moments, chewing on their food when Joyce spoke up again.

"So, Michael, do you work today?"

"I do, actually. Until seven. I was on my way and decided to stop by and see El before my shift started in..." he craned his neck to check the time on the microwave. "Twenty minutes."

Joyce bit her lip, her face twisting up with emotion. "Oh, you two are so adorable. Eleven's so lucky to have you."

Mike and El smiled at each other. She squeezed his hand in agreement.

"Well, I have to go, alright. You have a nice at work, Michael." Joyce turned to look at El, concerned. "Are you *sure* you're going to be okay on your own this weekend?" she asked.

"Of course, Mom."

Joyce smiled. "I know you can handle yourself." She grabbed her coat and keys and made for the door.

"Our things are already packed in my car, we'll be leaving straight after work. Don't wait up for dinner, okay, sweetie?" she called over her shoulder.

El spotted Joyce's purse on the table seat next to her and sighed. Joyce couldn't leave the house without forgetting something - purse, keys, her lunch, you name it. She fixated on the purse, focusing on making it move with her mind. The purse obeyed, floating up in the air. Eleven made it glide over to the shoe rack beside the front door. Her powers had gotten stronger over the years. It took her less effort to complete minor psychokinetic tasks. She barely even had nosebleeds anymore.

Joyce burst through the door, her eyes darting around the room frantically. "Oh, where is my purse...? Where on Earth did I put it...?"

"Right there, Mom," said Eleven, pointing to the purse. Mike stifled a laugh.

"Oh, thank you sweetie. Okay, bye now," said Joyce, already halfway out the door. In the distance, Joyce's 1979 Camry roared to life.

"You actually snored last night, you know," said Mike, his mouth full of eggs. "Like, full on snoring. I've never heard you snore in 3 years."

Eleven blushed. "Oh God," she groaned, embarrassed.

Mike laughed. "No, it was funny. These thunderous snores coming from such a small and adorable person. It was kind of cute, actually."

"I may be small, but I *am* powerful," corrected El, her eyebrows shooting upwards in defiance.

"Right. Small, powerful, and adorable." Mike rose from his seat and went to rinse his plate and fork in the sink. He kissed her on the cheek. "Gotta go. Love you. I'll be back after my shift."

"Love you," said El weakly. Her heart raced at the thought of tonight.

It was late afternoon when Eleven stepped into *Wheelerz*, the skate shop at Starcourt Mall.

"Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in," a familiar voice called. Maxine Mayfield stepped out from the backstore, carrying a mountain of skateboard apparel.

"Hey, Max," said El.

"Hey you." She deposited the items on the cash counter and turned to face her friend. "Totally bombed that English exam yesterday, by the way. But I'm sure you can't say the same."

It was true. Eleven loved English class. Mike, on the other hand, was terrible at it - poetry and literature were not his thing. So El would help him with English and German, whereas Mike would tutor her in science and math. It worked out perfectly for them.

"What's that?" asked Max, pointing to the small pink bag Eleven was holding. El turned beet red.

"This? Uh, nothing."

"No seriously though, what is it?"

"It's nothing! Just... clothes."

Max squinted her eyes. "You know you're a terrible liar, right? Give me that." Max yanked the bag out of Eleven's hand.

"Max! Stop!"

"Ah, ah, ah - what do we have here..." mused Max as she pulled out a lilac see-through lace bra and underwear. Her mouth fell open. Eleven had never been so ashamed in her life.

Max exploded. "JANE. HOPPER. ARE YOU KIDDING ME! What IS this?! Is this for Mike? Oooh la la," she taunted, studying the lingerie. Eleven desperately reached for underwear, but Max kept it them out of reach. She had no choice but to use her powers to snatch her lingerie out of Max's hands, glaring at her with the fire of a thousand suns.

"Okay, one, I thought we made it clear, no using your powers on me. And two, I need answers. Now. Speak." Max clicked her tongue and folded her arms across her chest, looking at El expectantly.

"Well, I.. uh... I'm..."

"You're planning on having SEX WITH HIM," Max bellowed. "Is that what this is?"

"Will you STOP SCREAMING?" hissed El, looking around to see if anyone had heard. The store was basically empty, except for one customer who kept curiously glancing back at them.

"Who cares about him? This is HUGE! Tell me everything," Max leaned over the counter.

And so El told her. About how she and Mike had taken... steps in that direction, and that due to these recent events, she now had confirmation Mike was ready too.

Max took a deep breath. "Okay. First, let me just say, I am profoundly annoyed by the fact that you haven't told me this before."

El rolled her eyes. "Max, this happened five days ago."

Max shook her head, a grave expression on her face. "Doesn't matter. As your best girl, you're obliged to tell me these things within 24 hours."

El opened her mouth to speak, but Max cut her off. "SECOND - I am SO happy for you. I mean, you guys are basically *soul mates*. It's about time you took the next step."

"Max, we're 16 - it's not like we're 25 and still a virgin. Not all of us are in a hurry to lose it like you and Lucas," snapped El, and immediately wished she could take it back. Lucas and Max had slept together for the first time last year, and it had kind of messed everything up between them. After a messy breakup, it had taken some time for them to be friends again. Now, things were back to normal between them, and although they weren't officially back together yet, they were making progress in that direction.

"I shouldn't have said that, I'm really sorry..." said El.

"It's cool," Max said with a shrug. "You're totally right - it is a big deal, and you shouldn't rush into it."

Eleven smiled at her friend. One of the reasons she liked Max so much was because of how laid-back and easy-going she was. It was very hard to offend her, no matter how clumsy El could be when expressing her thoughts. They may have had rough start to their relationship due to El's protective nature of Mike, however once she got used to having another girl in her group (and realized Max wasn't going to try to steal Mike away from her), she gave her a chance and found that she genuinely liked her as person. They had even grown to be best friends over the last few years.

"I have go take care of this," Max gestured to the pile of clothing before her with a look of sheer dread on her face. "But please, please, please, call me IMMEDIATELY after. I'll need details. I'll be waiting by the phone."

El rolled her eyes and laughed as she turned to exit the store.
"Promise."

It was 7:15 and Eleven was ready.

Nervous, but ready.

She studied herself in the bathroom mirror after applying her second and final coat of mascara, and barely recognized the person staring back at her. She'd borrowed some of Joyce's makeup - purple eyeshadow, pink lipstick, a little bit of blush. Her shoulder length hair was heavily teased at the roots, her loose curls frozen in place with the help of a ton of hairspray.

El studied her brand new bra and underwear. The fabric was beautiful, but *so* uncomfortable. Even though this was far from her usual style, she thought she looked pretty decent. The lingerie fit her perfectly, hugging her curves in all the right places (the bra was a push-up and even helped her B-cup breasts look just a little bit bigger.) Plus, she had bought her very first pair of heels. She couldn't actually walk in them yet, but figured it wouldn't hurt to practice, seeing as she was a short girl with a tall boyfriend and they would probably come in handy at some time or another in her life.

She let out a nervous sigh, and did a turn on herself in the mirror as a final inspection, adjusting a few stray strands of hair here and there, pushing her boobs up.

"This is as good as it's going to get," she said to herself in the mirror. She thought her heart was going to leap out of her chest.

A knock at the door. Mike. El scuttled to her room as fast as she could in her heels, lighting two candles and placing her newly-bought vinyl record of *Cry To Me* on the turntable.

"Come in!" she hollered, her voice breaking.

She heard the door open, close. Mike taking off his shoes, placing his bag on the floor. Steps, more steps. El stood, trembling, waiting impatiently. "In here!" she yelled.

Mike opened the door. The expression on his face turned to utter shock. El offered him a nervous smile. Mike stood, unmoving, staring at her mouth agape.

El took two careful steps towards him. "D... dance with me?" she offered clumsily, trying to sound sweet and vulnerable like Baby.

Mike squinted at her. "What's... going on?" El's heart dropped.

"What?"

Mike laughed. "What the hell are you doing? Heels? Makeup? What is this...?"

Eleven felt her face heat up in embarrassment. "I... I don't know know..."

"And what happened to your hair?" he asked, a slight disapproving look on his face as he studied her. He paused to sniff the air. "Are you wearing Joyce's perfume?"

Tears were beginning to form in the inner corner of her eyes. This was not the reaction she had anticipated from him at all. Suddenly she felt completely ridiculous and had somehow lost the ability to look Mike in the eyes.

She had spent so much effort (and not to mention wasted half her paycheck) to please Mike, and he was making her feel like a clown. Wasn't he ready for this? Wasn't lingerie supposed to excite boys? Didn't she look good? Mike always told her she looked beautiful. But right now he was looking at her like she was a different person entirely. She began to choke up. Mike continued to stare at her.

"Mike... I'd like you to go," El whispered.

"What?" he asked, concerned. This seemed to snap him out of his daze.

"I want you to leave," she repeated, this time more firmly. Her shame was giving way to anger. How dare he make her feel stupid like this! Or was *she* the stupid one for setting this whole thing up to impress him...

A pained look across flashed across his face. "What, are you serious? Come on, El - I'm sorry okay? I shouldn't have said that," he prompted gently.

"Whatever." It took a lot of effort to keep her voice steady. She glanced upwards at him and looked him dead in the eye. "Go," she added.

"El, I'm not leaving. I said I was sorry. It's just -"

"I don't care!" El spat as she reached for her bathrobe and secured it tightly around her waist. "I want you to leave! I don't want to see you right now..."

Mike closed in the distance between them, looking at her like he was about to start crying any second. It broke her heart, even in the heat of the moment. The biggest part of El wanted him to take her in his arms, apologize probably another hundred times, and things would go back to normal. But the small part of her that was hurt and angry wanted to punish him for hurting her feelings.

"Eleven," he said softly. "Come on, don't do this..." She avoided looking into his big brown eyes at all cost, knowing she would bend if she so much as caught a glance of the guilt and sorrow that surely lay within them.

"Good night Mike," she said coldly.

Mike stood frozen in place, baffled. He didn't want to leave. "El..."

"I SAID GO!" she screamed, tears running down her face. Mike recoiled, looking like he had just about been stabbed in the heart. She turned her back to him. Her wounded heart couldn't stand to look at him for one more second.

"Please leave, Mike," she corrected.

More silence.

"Okay..." he whispered, then walked away.

In the distance, she heard the front door close. She burst into tears.

Why was she reacting this way? Why had she pushed him away? For the first time in her life, she both loved and hated Mike. Her emotions were a mess, and she didn't understand any of it.

She made her way to the living room and picked up the phone.

"Hello?" an eager voice picked up.

Relief flooded her. She sank into the phone, fresh tears running down her face. "Oh, Max..."

3. Chapter 3

Mike's original plan was walk around town for a little while to try to calm himself, then go back and apologize to Joyce for ruining her dinner. As mad as he was at his entire family right now - including El - he still felt terrible for storming out and ruining all hard work she'd put into her welcome-home party.

But after twenty minutes, he still wasn't ready to face everyone yet. Truth was, he needed to talk about it. About Will, about his parents divorce, about how mad he was at everyone for leaving him in the dark for such important matters.

He stopped at a payphone on Cherry Tree Drive.

"Hello?" an older woman's voice demanded.

"Mrs. Henderson, it's Mike Wheeler. How are you?"

"Michael! Oh my goodness! I haven't seen you in ages! How *are* ya, darlin'? How's your mother?"

"I'm good. She's good. We're good," Mike lied. "I was calling to ask if Dustin was home. I'd like to come over and see him"

"DUSTIN!" Mrs. Henderson screamed into the phone. Mike winced, distancing the phone from his ear. "DUSTIN, IT'S MICHAEL ON THE PHONE FOR YOU!"

Silence as Mrs. Henderson put down the phone. Mike put the phone back to his ear.

"Yeah?"

"Hey man. It's Mike. Listen, can I come over?"

"Yeah, dude. Lucas is here, too. We're downstairs playing A Link to the Past."

Mike smiled into the phone. Perfect.

"Alright, I'll be there in 5."

"And then I left," finished Mike. He sighed, frustrated with himself. The whole thing seemed really childish when he told the story out loud.

Dustin shook his head, not peeling his eyes away from the TV. "Wow. You didn't hold back. I can't believe you ruined Joyce's dinner."

"Yeah, man," agreed Lucas. "Joyce is like, the sweetest human being on Earth. The worst part is she's probably over there feeling like shit, thinking it's her fault in some twisted way."

Mike rubbed his face in his hands. "I know. I feel terrible about it. And I'll apologize to her as soon as I get home. But this isn't about Joyce. This is about Will not telling me he was gay."

"Dude, he didn't *tell* us either," said Lucas. "It's not like there was some big coming out. I kind of already knew. Then James came along and it was like, *Oh, alright. Makes sense*, you know? Can't say I was surprised."

"Yeah, me neither," said Dustin, punching away at the buttons on his *Super Nintendo* controller. "It wasn't a big deal."

Mike just looked at them, shocked. "*Not a big deal?* Will's been carrying this secret for years, and he's never told us! Kept it hidden this whole time! Don't you guys feel at least a little bit betrayed?"

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Mike, you're acting like such a girl right now. He probably never told us because he wasn't ready. And when he finally *was* ready, he brought James. And now everyone knows. And we all like him just the same."

"Lucas is right, man," agreed Dustin. "Nothing's changed."

Mike considered this as he watched the game in silence.

Dustin spoke up again. "But, you know, maybe Will wasn't all that comfortable telling you, either. When he started seeing James, he practically begged us not to tell you. Said he wanted to tell you

himself. I guess he just never had the guts to go through with it."

Mike straightened himself up on the couch and angled his body towards Dustin. "See, that's exactly what I mean. Why the fuck did he feel like he couldn't tell me? *That's* what bothers me. We've always been so open and honest with each other," he explained. "I don't get it. I just don't."

"Dude, you used to try to set him up with girls in high school. And you were way pushy about it, too," said Lucas. "Maybe he just thought you wouldn't be that open."

Mike laughed. "What? I wasn't pushy about it."

"Yeah, you kinda were," said Dustin.

Mike scoffed in disbelief, folding his arms across his chest defensively
"Okay, it happened like, three times! And did it ever occur to you that I just wanted him to find someone that would make him happy? Will's a great guy. And he's been through so much. I just wanted to help."

"Well, he's happy now," said Lucas. "And you kinda ruined it for him."

Mike let the wave of guilt wash over him. He knew he deserved it.

"Plus, for a time you used to say "that's gay" a lot," continued Lucas. "That was gay, this was gay. It was kind of your favourite adjective for a while."

Mike thought back to eighth grade and those awkward, obnoxious, attention-seeking puberty years. Lucas was right. He did used to throw that word around a lot.

"You're right," he admitted shamefully. "But I never meant it like that...I never meant to hurt his feelings... God, how was I such an idiot back then?"

"Not an idiot, just immature. As all eighth graders are," said Dustin, his first encouraging words of the night.

Mike rose to his feet. His business was done here. He knew he had to

go home and start apologizing. "Okay. I have to go. Thank for not letting me come here to wallow in self-pity."

"That's not what you came here for, Mike. You came here so we could tell you you were an asshole," said Dustin.

"So you could face it, accept it, and go make up for it," finished Lucas. They both looked up from the game and smiled at him triumphantly.

Mike shook his head, grinning. "You guys know me too well."

When he got home to the Buyers house, the lights were out in the kitchen and living room. It was 10:30. Mike had stayed at Dustin's longer than he'd thought. He had no choice but to wait to apologize to Joyce in the morning.

As he passed by Will's window while making his way to El's, he noticed the lights were out and his room was vacant. He'd successfully driven Will out of the comfort of his own home.

When he slid El's window open, she was reading on her bed in one of his t-shirts. She put her book down when she saw Mike come in.

"I'm sorry," he declared almost immediately. "I really am."

El offered him an encouraging smile and patted the bed, motioning for him to come over. Mike kicked off his shoes, shut the window, and went to sit down next to her. She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he leaned his head on top of hers.

"I feel terrible about your mom. And Will. And you," he said, lacing his fingers through hers. "I should have never snapped at you like that. I'm so sorry, El."

She squeezed his hand. "I feel terrible too. I hated having to keep a secret from you. But Will begged me not to tell you anything until he did. I was so torn about it, Mike."

Mike turned his head to look at her face. "I understand. I do. Please don't be sorry, El. I'm the one who acted like a jerk. I don't know why

I made such a big deal about it."

El propped her chin on his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "Because you felt betrayed. By Will, me, and your mom for not telling you about her divorce. Everything blew up in your face at the same time. You're not perfect, Mike. It's okay to not be okay sometimes."

Mike closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against hers. God, he loved her.

"And don't worry about my mom," continued El in a soft voice. "She understands. She's not mad at you. She's just concerned."

This made him feel even worse. "I'll apologize first thing to her in the morning. Then I'll go talk to Will and James." He paused. "What... happened after I left?"

El sighed, and propped herself up against the wall. "Well, Will was pretty upset. He and James left almost immediately after you. The rest of us finished dinner, then your mom and Holly left, and the rest of us played cards and had some tea."

Mike swallowed hard. He had to think of a way to make it up to them.

El placed two fingers under his chin, gently lifting it so he would look into her eyes. "Mike, don't worry about it. It's going to be okay. Just make sure Will understands that you love him, no matter what his sexual preference is. So what if he's gay? It's not going to change anything in your friendship. As long as he's happy and healthy. It's all that matters."

Mike sighed. El was right, of course, as she often was. "You're right," he admitted out loud, drawing shapes with his finger on El's thigh.

El leaned in to kiss him. "Come to bed," she yawned, placing her book on her nightstand. "Tomorrow's another day, okay?"

"I'll go brush my teeth, I'll be right back," he said. As he made his way to the bathroom, he passed a framed picture of him and Will when they were kids, all dressed up for one of their first D&D evenings. He brushed his fingers across the photograph, reminiscing about simpler

times, and longed for morning to come so he could make things right with him.

When he got back to the room, El was fast asleep with the night lamp on. He smiled as he went to turn it off, then stripped down to his boxers and crawled into bed with her. He wrapped his arm around her, spooning her as he gently pulled her body closer to him, and kissed her neck, feeling luckier than ever to be in love with his best friend.

4. Chapter 4

CHAPTER 4

The one thing Eleven disliked about summer was how quickly it seemed to go by. It was unfair that winter was technically just as long a season, but seemed to drag on so much longer, whereas summer always came and went in a flash. Between their bike rides across town, trips to the *Scoops Ahoy!* Ice cream parlour, swimming at the quarry, and her new favorite activity - making love to Mike - there was never a dull moment, and El wanted to put a pause on this period of time her life. Things were simply just too good. She and Mike had been spending even more alone time than they usually did these past few weeks (discovering the wonders of sex, mostly) and Max had confided in El that she missed her terribly. She felt bad for setting her friend aside, and promised to spend more time with her.

On a warm Thursday afternoon, they made their way to *Scoops Ahoy!* to share a caramel sundae before meeting Lucas and Max at the quarry for a swim. It was mid-July, which meant for late sunsets, blistering hot days, and warm, perfect evenings.

"Ahoy," greeted Dustin unenthusiastically from behind the counter as Mike and El walked into the ice cream shop. Steve Harrington had passed down his part-time job to Dustin when he'd left Hawkins for college with his girlfriend, Maya. Dustin had only agreed to it a) for the free ice cream and b), because he had lost his job at the arcade after being repeatedly caught playing at the stations during his working hours. Needless to say, he was quite bitter about getting fired, seeing as his one true passion in life was video games. He spent most of his time at the arcade anyway - the only difference was that he was no longer getting paid for it, which hurt his wallet terribly. Eleven, on the other hand, thought he looked fabulous in his *Scoops Ahoy!* uniform, with his cute little sailor hat resting unevenly on his curly mound of hair.

"You know we come by here just to hear you say that, right?" teased Mike, a devilish grin plastered to his face.

"Very funny, Wheeler. Glad my misery is so fucking amusing to you,"

replied Dustin monotonously. He turned to El, offering her a warm smile. "Hey El."

"Hi Dustin. Can we get an caramel sundae, please? With chocolate sprinkles on top."

"The usual then, huh? Sure thing." Mike handed him two one-dollar bills, which Dustin placed in the tip jar instead of the cash register. Mike sighed in exasperation.

"Dustin - how many times do I have to tell you? You'll get fired if you keep doing that." He glanced at the camera above them.

"No one cares, Mike, trust me," said Dustin, his back towards them as he poured vanilla ice cream into a plastic container.

"Fine. But you can't say I didn't try to warn you when it happens."

Dustin rolled his eyes and handed Mike their sundae. "Noted. Now get out of here, Suzanne's going to be here any minute and I don't want you around to throw me off my game."

Mike gave him a questioning look. "Who the hell is Suzanne?" he asked him, mildly intrigued.

"Works at the Radio Shack two stores down, purple short-cropped hair, nose piercing...?"

Mike racked his brain. "Isn't she in her mid-thirties or something like that?"

Dustin squinted at him. "You are so closed-minded, dude. Who CARES? She's hot. She's got a great rack, and always leave me a good tip. She calls me *sweetie*," he added, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively at Mike.

Mike and El exchanged a look. *Just drop it*, El told him with her eyes.

"Sure, Dustin. Anyway, if you want to come join us later, we'll be out at the quarry with Lucas and Max." Mike doubted that Dustin would accept the offer, but insisted on extending the invitation to him anyway. Thing was, Dustin had never really completely gotten over

Max. It had created some friction between him and Lucas, back when he and Max were dating. In the beginning of their relationship, Lucas had been all about Max, treating her like a queen to win her over. But then as soon as they slept together, Lucas had discarded Max in favor of other girls - easier, sluttier girls, in El's opinion - leaving her completely heartbroken. It was Dustin who was there for her, telling her she deserved so much better, someone who would love her and appreciate her. But unfortunately, she had friendzoned him years ago, and there was nothing he could do to make him see her in a different light.

"No thanks, I'll pass. Gonna head out to the the arcade and try to suck up to Charlie. I'm hoping he'll give me my job back."

"Good luck with that," called Mike behind him, as he and Eleven turned to exit the parlour. A purple-haired woman with a nose piercing stepped into the store as they were walking out.

"Hey, Suzanne," said Mike casually as he passed by her. Suzanne gave him a puzzled look, visibly baffled that he knew her name.

He could practically feel Dustin's glare burning holes in the back of his head.

"You ready down there?" Lucas shouted from the top of his lungs.

It was 8h30 pm and Max, Lucas, El and Mike had spent the vast majority of the afternoon swimming - and cliff-jumping - at the quarry, which was one of their favourite hang-out spots during the summer. They almost always had the whole place to themselves since it wasn't directly accessible from Hawkins, having to go through the deep woods, and take several turns along winding paths. Luckily, the boys in their group knew their way around this part of town like the back of their hand.

"I'm ready!" El shouted back. "Jump!"

Lucas wouldn't admit it, but he was scared shitless to jump every single time, although he fully trusted in El's telekinetic ability to help support his weight in mid-air. He tried to embrace the fear - it was

part of the thrill.

"Here I go!" He took a deep breath, stepped back, and dove off the cliff gracefully, performing five front flips before landing in the water gracefully. Lucas resurfaced, yanking his head back in an effort to flip his wet afro away from his face.

"How many? 6?" he asked, eager.

"5. You can't beat my record," boasted Max.

"That's because you're lighter than I am," retorted Lucas, annoyed. "So you have time to do more flips. I fall more quickly."

Max let out a dry laugh. "That's bullshit. El uses the same amount of psychic force on all of us. You're just the sorest loser I've ever met," she taunted, splashing him once.

Lucas splashed her back. "Am not. It's a question of physics."

"Oh, because you're *so* good at physics."

"Guys," Mike chimed in. "We all know I'm the one that can do the most flips."

"That's because El cheats with you! I'm sure she gives you twice the amount of hang-time," said Lucas bitterly.

El rolled her eyes, mildly offended. Sure, she was biased towards Mike, but she wasn't a cheater. "I do not. You're just salty."

"Salty Sally," repeated Max, splashing him again. Lucas responded by dunking her head in the water. Max resurfaced and climbed on his back, sinking his whole body into the lake.

"Alright, we're gonna go get changed then head to Starcourt," announced Lucas, rather unenthusiastically. "I lost the bet. So we're going to see *Dirty Dancing* thanks to this one's terrible taste in movies." He splashed Max again. Max smiled at him triumphantly.

"To be fair, it's not as bad as you'd think," said Mike, much to El's surprise. *So he'd seen it...*

Lucas scoffed. "Sorry dude, but your opinion ain't valid. You're way too much of a softie." He flashed his cocky, signature Lucas smile at Mike.

"Mike isn't a softie - he's a gentleman and a romantic. You should be taking notes," defended Max.

Lucas splashed her vigorously in response. Max squealed as she attempted to shield her face with her hands.

"Get out of here before I dunk you again!" he threatened jokingly.

"Later guys," said Max, as she and Lucas waded out of the water. They assembled their things into Lucas' car and drove off.

Mike swam towards El. She placed her arms around his neck, and wrapped her legs around his waist. Mike was surprised at how easily he was treading water.

"Are you using your powers right now?" he asked her, suspicious. "Because I can't feel any of your weight on me."

El giggled. "Yeah, a little bit. I don't want you to drown."

Mike rolled his eyes. "You're so light, El. I don't need your help to support you, especially in water. Lucas was right, you do cheat!" he teased, knowing she would take the bait.

El gave him a soft push on the chest and stopped her psychokinetic focus at once. "I do not cheat!"

Mike laughed and they kissed, floating in the water.

Eleven's eyes lit up. "Hey, we should sleep here tonight," she proposed excitedly. "Grab some of my dad's camping gear. Set up tent. Roast some marshmallows on a nice fire..."

"Make love to my beautiful girlfriend under the night sky..." Mike continued. El grinned at him mischievously.

"Okay, let's get out of here before the sun sets."

To Mike's utter and complete surprise, Hopper had agreed - although reluctantly - to let them camp out at the quarry for the night. He packed the last bit of camping gear into his car and closed the trunk, turning to face them.

"Okay. That's about all you'll need. Be safe, *no drinking*," he said sternly, cautiously handing Mike the car keys. "You can take my car for the night - we'll use Joyce's if ever we need anything. Be back tomorrow morning, or call the house before 10 am sharp to let me know you're safe, or be grounded. Simple as that. I don't want to have to worry about you."

Mike tried very hard not to roll his eyes, knowing Hopper would probably smack him if ever he caught him in the act.

"10 am. Got it," repeated El. It blew Mike's mind that Eleven was so good with authority, when he wasn't at the slightest. He absolutely hated it when his parents instilled stupid rules and curfews. He felt they were old enough to make these kinds of decisions on his own - it's not like they were children anymore.

"What about you, Wheeler," said Hopper, as if to spite him. "You got all that?"

"Got it." said Mike through gritted teeth, glaring at Hopper. Hopper sneered back at him. They didn't exactly have the best relationship, but sucked it up to please El.

"Have fun. Be safe." He kissed Eleven on the cheek. El happily walked over to the passenger seat of the car.

Hopper turned to face Mike. "Anything happens to her, you're a dead man." Mike couldn't help rolling his eyes for real this time. If he had a dollar for every time Hopper threatened him like this, he'd be the richest guy in Hawkins.

"As if I would let anything happen to her. I think you know me better than that." Hopper had no smart remark to offer up in return. He simply let Mike pass beside him as he entered the driver's seat.

"I want to stay here like this forever," declared El, and Mike couldn't agree with her more.

Life was perfect. As he lay beside her next to the fire watching the stars, their clothes discarded here and there around them, Mike wondered once again how he could be so lucky.

It wasn't normal to be this happy. Mike didn't even think it was possible. Yet again, after all the shit they had been through 4 years ago, all that pain and suffering, maybe life was giving them a break, and he just had to be thankful and enjoy it. He wondered if El saw it that way, too.

"Me, too," he said, tilting his head against hers.

"We should do this more often. I love camping."

"So do I," he repeated. The average person would probably think it was stupid the way they always seemed to agree with each other's ideas, or finished each other's sentences, but the truth was that they were genuinely on the same wavelength. They shared a lot of the same interests and opinions on a number of things, and Mike wouldn't have it any other way.

Life was so good.

"I know what I want for my birthday," mused El. "A book on astronomy. I'd love to know the stars, the constellations, and all that."

Mike thought it was a brilliant idea. "We'll read it together. Or you can teach them to me after you finish reading it."

El snuggled closer to Mike, pressing her face in his neck. "Then we can buy a telescope. And eventually, when we're married and have our own house, we can leave it on the porch in the summertime and show our kids."

Mike smiled. "Yeah. A nice two-story house with a wraparound porch. With sliding glass doors in our room so we can have direct access to it."

El beamed at him. "That sounds perfect, Mike."

"And we'll have this *huge* backyard so our dog can have plenty of space to roam."

"Two dogs," corrected El.

"Fine, two dogs. But absolutely no cats."

"Maybe a cat, someday, after our two dogs die and we're too sad to get another one."

Mike burst out laughing. "Oh, so the dogs are dead already? They had a short life."

"We'll bury them in the backyard and build a little graveyard for them, with wooden crosses for tombstones and everything. May they ever rest in peace."

And so they continued shaping their theoretical future life together, bouncing ideas off of each other until late in the night, when sleep finally came to claim them.

Little did they know, their world was about to turn upside down.

5. Chapter 5

CHAPTER 5

What woke Mike was the rain. He and Eleven had set up the tent, but ended up falling asleep on their sleeping bags, under the night sky. He squinted in the bright gray daylight, and looked to his side at El, who was still asleep by his side.

And then the world came crashing down on him.

Eleven, lying beside him, pale as a ghost. Her face, and sleeping bag, covered in blood from an apparent nosebleed.

Shock. Confusion. Panic.

"Oh my God, Eleven," he cried, sitting up at once. He shook her gently at first, then vigorously when she didn't respond within seconds.

"ELEVEN!" He cradled her between his legs, elevating her whole upper body and giving her light taps on the cheek.

"Come on El, wake up. Wake up..."

He looked at her face. Aside from the blood, she looked terrible. She was so pale, her skin looked almost translucent - he could see the blood vessels across her face, and dark purple bags were beginning to form under her eyes.

Which probably meant she had lost a lot of blood...

He looked around him. Their whole sleeping area, as well as the entire right side of his body, was covered in it.

Of course she had lost a lot of blood.

Mike checked her pulse. It was faint, but it was there. He brought his ear down to her lips and listened carefully - she was breathing. He set her aside gently, rose and picked her up from the ground, running to Hopper's car with her lifeless body in his hands, and gently placed

her on the backseat. His mind spun. How could this be happening? What *had* happened, exactly?

There was no time to think. He had to act, fast.

He grabbed his pants and covered El with one of their blankets. He got in the car and drove as fast as he could.

Mike arrived in front of the E.R. and slammed on the brakes, the car screeching to a halt. He grabbed El and ran, bursting through the hospital doors.

"HELP! I NEED A DOCTOR!" he screamed.

Two nurses arrived at his side.

"What happened?" one of them asked him, scrutinizing El's unconscious body, a horrified look on her face.

"I don't know, I don't know, I woke up and she was like this. She was fine last night," he explained, his voice breaking at every word.

The other nurse looked him up and down, eyeing him suspiciously. Mike couldn't believe it. Could she possibly think he would have done this to her?

"What's her name? Age?" the first nurse asked.

"Eleven - I mean, Jane Hopper. She's 16."

"We need a doctor at the E.R., 16-year-old unconscious female. Looks severely hemorrhaged." A third nurse arrived with a stretcher. Mike didn't need to be told what to do, and immediately placed El's body onto it.

He thought he was going to faint. *Severely hemorrhaged?* He didn't know what that meant exactly, but he knew it was bad.

Very, very bad.

This couldn't be happening.

"We're gonna need you stay right here sir," the unfriendly nurse told him, holding a hand up towards him.

"Where are you taking her?" he asked.

But they were already gone. The three nurses wheeled El's body through the swinging doors down the hall, and in the distance, Mike could see a doctor running to the room where they had just taken her.

For a minute he just stood there. Dizzy, nauseous. Everyone in the E.R. was staring at him, but he wasn't seeing any of them. He ran to a nearby phone, and called Hopper at the Byers' residence.

No answer.

"FUCK!" he screamed, and slammed the phone down. He picked it up again, and dialed the police station with trembling fingers.

"Hawkins County Sheriff Department, how may I help you?"

"I need to speak with Jim Hopper right away,"

"May I ask who is asking for him?"

"GODDAMMIT THIS IS MIKE WHEELER, I NEED TO TALK TO HIM! IT'S AN EMERGENCY! IT'S ABOUT HIS DAUGHTER!" he yelled into the phone. They didn't have time for this!

Silence on the other end. "Hold, please."

Hopper arrived at the hospital about 4 ½ minutes after Mike called him.

"What the hell happened?" he thundered. His eyes widened as he studied Mike's bloodied upper body.

"I woke up and she was covered in blood. She was fine when we went to sleep, I don't understand what went wrong," explained Mike.

"What time did you go to sleep?"

"It must have been 2 or 3 in the morning. I don't know."

Hopper processed this. "And when did you get here, exactly?"

"Maybe 15, 20 minutes ago. Woke up 10 minutes before that." Mike was sick of repeating the horrible turn of events. He was the one who wanted information. But he knew he had to tell Hopper everything he knew.

He let out a shaky breath. "It looked like a nosebleed. That's where the blood was came from. Except a really, really bad one. They said she was severely hemorrhaged." His voice cracked at the two last words.

Hopper looked at him with visible panic in his eyes. His mind seemed to be racing a million miles per hour. Mike knew the feeling.

"Jim!" Joyce Buyers burst through the main entrance. She ran to Hopper and gave him a hug. "What happened?" she asked, frantic. Hopper repeated the information to her. Mike was grateful.

"Oh my God," she muttered, covering her mouth with her hand. "Michael, you poor thing," she said, walking towards Mike and pulled him into a tight hug. Mike hugged her back, and the tears starting flowing down his face.

He wept.

Mike sat in the E.R. waiting room for what seemed like forever, staring at the floor tiles. He had so many questions. He had no idea what to think. He didn't understand any of it - how his life could be so good before he went to sleep, and turn into such a nightmare the moment he woke up.

Nothing made sense. What had caused the nosebleed? Had he hit her with his elbow in his sleep? Had she bumped or scraped her nose on the ground? And why was it taking so damn long for the doctors and nurses to come back with an update on her condition?

"Mike..."

He looked up. It was his sister, Nancy. His heart lifted momentarily.

"Nancy." Nancy walked towards her brother and put her arms around his neck, embracing him. Mike was surprised at how comforted he felt by her presence. Even though they used to fight all the time as kids, their relationship had definitely improved as they grew older, especially since she had left home and gone to college. He was genuinely happy to spend time with her when she came back to town during her school breaks.

"I am so sorry, Mike," she said softly, tightening her grip on him.

Mike couldn't help it. He started weeping again.

"Please don't - don't ask me to tell you what hap-happened, I can't relive it - it again, it's too horr-horrible." His entire body heaved with each sob.

"It's okay, I already know," she said soothingly, and gently stroked his back. "Joyce told me on the phone."

Mike let go of his sister and tried to compose himself. He wiped the tears from his face with both hands, and took a deep breath, falling to his chair again.

"I brought you a shirt and towel," she said, producing the items from her purse.

"Thanks," he replied, taking them from her. "Can you stay here for a second while I go to the bathroom? In case the doctors come back."

Nancy offered him a warm smile and placed her hand on his shoulder. "Of course."

As if on cue, a doctor came through the swinging doors and was making his way to Hopper, Joyce, Nancy, and Mike, clipboard in hand.

"For Jane Hopper?"

"Yes," Mike sprang up immediately, discarding the shirt and towel. The doctor studied him warily. He probably looked like a crazed

maniac, but he couldn't care less.

"Yes," repeated Hopper, stepping in. He stuck out his hand. "Jim Hopper, County Sheriff."

"Nice to meet you, Sheriff." The doctor turned to Hopper, seemingly pleased to be communicating with an adult. Mike tried not to be offended, but frankly, it pissed him off.

"I understand you're the adoptive father, Mr. Hopper?" he said, double-checking the information on his clipboard.

"Yes, sir."

"And you're her partner, Mr. Wheeler? You're the one who brought her in, is that correct?"

Mike nodded.

The doctor sighed, removing his glasses and letting them fall around his neck. "So I've got some good news, and some bad news," he said, glancing from Hopper to Mike. Mike's heart sank. "Which would you like to hear first?"

Hopper opened his mouth to speak, but Mike cut him off.

"The good news. I need to hear it. Please," he begged.

"Jane is in stable condition. We did a blood transfusion. Luckily her blood type, A+, is the most common, and we had more than enough in store for her. She's still unconscious at the moment, but she'll be fine. We predict she should awaken within twenty-four hours, at the most."

The wave of relief that came over Mike was so intense that he felt dizzy again and almost had to sit down. She was going to be fine! He said she was stable! They had saved her! Mike was so happy, he had to fight the urge to hug the doctor.

"And the bad news?" asked Hopper, reluctant. Mike came down from his cloud. Right. The bad news. He had completely forgotten about that part.

The doctor paused, a grave expression on his face. "Jane has a potentially cancerous, golf ball-sized tumour on her brain."

6. Chapter 6

Guys, bear with me through this long ass chapter. There was no way I could separate it though, I'm sorry! I also wanted to take a minute to thank every single person that took the time to review, favourite, or follow this story. You guys really encourage me to keep going :) I try to update every 2 days, and I predict there's about 5 or 6 more chapters to come! Sooo, without further ado...

CHAPTER 6

In Mike's dream, he and Eleven were running in the woods that led to the quarry, except that the surrounding trees were replaced by huge sunflower fields, and they were kids again - maybe twelve or thirteen. Eleven was ahead of him, wearing Nancy's old pink dress - the first one she ever owned - looking back over her shoulder at Mike as she ran, laughing and gliding her hand along the flowers. The sun was shining profusely. It was another beautiful summer day. Mike picked up the pace, yet couldn't seem to catch up to her.

"El! Wait up!" He called.

"Hurry, Mike!"

She came to a halt at the edge of the cliff. As Mike got closer to her, dark grey clouds were beginning to form in the sky, making the sun disappear entirely. He could hear the low rumbling of thunder in the distance.

Blood rain began to drip from the sky.

Horrified, he ran faster and faster until he finally reached Eleven. She stood face to him, pale and sickly, fat droplets of blood rain coming down on her face. Her nose was also bleeding profusely, creating two rivers of blood that flowed onto pink dress.

"Look what they did to me," she said softly, running a hand through her shaved hair. Mike noticed a golf ball-sized lump on the back of her head that he had never seen before.

"Eleven," he said softly, his heart breaking into a million pieces. He took a few steps forward, wanting to hold and comfort her, but the ground stretched out beneath him as he walked towards her, making it impossible for him to close in the distance between them.

She began to sob. "Help me, Mike. Promise you'll save me."

"Of course, El! I promise! Always!" He took another step towards her, reaching for her hand. She reached for his in return, but to no avail. It was like they were being kept apart by some unseen magnetic force. Eventually, Eleven gave up, and raised both arms to her sides.

Then she jumped backwards over the cliff.

"NO!" he screamed, and dove off the cliff after her. He fell, faster and faster, until he finally grabbed her hand before they hit the water.

Mike woke with a start. He looked up and saw El, sleeping on her hospital bed, her hand in his. The lights were shut off, and it was completely dark in the room, except for the glowing lights emitting from medical equipment.

He'd spent the day at the hospital, staying by Eleven's side the whole time, praying she would wake up at any minute. His mom had called El's room and asked if he wanted to come home for dinner, but he'd refused - the last thing he wanted was to talk to his parents and younger sister about what had happened to El - so Nancy had come by later to bring him some leftovers. Then he'd watched T.V. for most of the evening, and that was the last thing he remembered. He figured the nurses must have turned it off when they came to shut off the lights.

Mike reached for the nightstand beside Eleven's bed, where the medical staff had stored her personal belongings, and grabbed his old wrist watch that now belonged to El. 2:25 am. He tried very hard not to worry that she still hadn't woken up yet, telling himself for the millionth time there was nothing he could do but wait. So he removed his shoes and climbed onto El's bed - while being extremely careful not to remove the tubes that were coming out of her arm - and snuggled in beside her, pressing his forehead to hers.

Then he drifted off to a dreamless sleep.

Mike lingered in the state between awake and sleep when he heard Eleven's voice calling his name for the first time. He wanted to stay asleep, afraid that she would still be unconscious if he woke.

"Mike..." Her voice seemed to come from thousand-mile long tunnel, echoing in his head.

"Mike." The voice was suddenly very close, snapping to focus. His eyes flew open, and the first thing he saw was Eleven's smiling face, just inches away from his own. "Wake up, Sleepyhead."

"El!" he whispered, placing a hand on the side of her face. He stroked her cheek with his thumb affectionately. "You're awake!"

She laughed, and it was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard. El put her hand over his and gave it a light squeeze. "I am."

Mike leaned in to kiss her, then wrapped his arm around her and held her tightly against his body. It felt so good to have her back, he wasn't going to let himself worry about the tumour in her brain, and how he was going to break this news to her.

"Mike, you're kind of smothering me," he heard her mumble into his chest.

He loosened his grip a little bit. "Sorry! Sorry - it's just so good to have you back. I was so worried."

She slithered out of his grasp to face him again. "What happened, Mike?" she asked softly, her eyes filled with worry.

"Miss Hopper, you're awake."

Mike and Eleven both jumped and turned towards the unfamiliar deep voice that had interrupted their conversation. Mike recognized the man standing in the doorway as Dr. Epstein, the doctor assigned to El's case. He looked back and forth between the two of them several times, and cleared his throat. Mike suddenly realized that he wasn't supposed be sharing El's hospital bed. He quickly returned to

his chair, feeling his cheeks grow hot in embarrassment. He looked over at El and could tell she trying hard not laugh.

"I'm sorry to interrupt. My name is Dr. Epstein, Miss Hopper. I've been assigned to take care of you." He extended his hand to El. She shook it.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Epstein. You can call me Jane," she added humbly.

Dr. Epstein gave her a warm smile. "Alright then, Jane. I'm assuming you have a lot of questions, and I promise you, I will answer all of them. But first, I'd like to get your dad in here so I can talk to the three of you at the same time, in the same room. That way we can save some time and get on with your recovery process as soon as possible. Is that okay with you?" he asked her.

Mike decided that he liked Dr. Epstein. The older man had a kind face, and seemed to be genuine about wanting to get her better, unlike other doctors who had the tendency of seeing of their patients as just another number.

El looked over at Mike with uncertainty, not liking how serious this conversation was getting. Mike took her hand and offered her an encouraging nod.

She turned to face Dr. Epstein. "Okay."

El, Mike, and Hopper each took a seat in Dr. Epstein's office. He closed the door behind him as he walked in after them, and went to sit at his desk.

They had finally removed the tubes from El's arm, and Hopper had brought over a brand new change of clothes for El. She felt like herself again, yet was eager to find out what had happened to her, and longed to put this whole thing behind her once and for all, so she and Mike could go back to their lives.

El sat in the middle of the three chairs, with Mike to her right. She reached over and grabbed his hand. He held it firmly, offering her an

encouraging look. *It's ok*, he mouthed to her.

Dr. Epstein opened up his file and took a moment to review his notes. He looked up at the three of them with a grave expression on his face. This was the most serious El had seen him be so far, which to be fair wasn't saying much considering the fact that she had met him barely an hour ago. Still, he had been nothing but friendly and warm to her so far.

"Okay, Jane. You should know I've asked your boyfriend and dad not to tell you anything before we got the chance to speak. I wanted you to get the facts first, the whole truth from a medical point of view. The purpose behind that line of thought was to spare you some potential emotional trauma or false assumptions that you could've made regarding your situation. Are you following what I'm saying?"

El swallowed hard. In all honesty, she wasn't. She looked over at Mike. He was watching her carefully with a pained expression on his face. Then over at her dad, who looked like he was just about to start crying.

"What's going on?" she asked weakly, turning to Dr. Epstein.

The kind doctor sighed. "Jane, you have a tumour on your brain. The size of a regular golf-ball, to be precise."

El felt like she had been slapped in the face. *Tumour?* Her mind spun. A nauseating feeling was beginning to build at the pit of her stomach, and she felt her pace quicken.

"Tumour?" she squeaked. Mike squeezed her hand and from the corner of her eye, she saw her dad wiping a tear from his cheek.

The doctor nodded gravely. "Yes. Now, first, we're going to need to do some tests to find out if it's benign or cancerous. We couldn't do these tests sooner, because of the condition you were in yesterday. As I previously explained to your dad and Mike, this tumour caused you to hemorrhage internally - rather severely. You were lucky that your boyfriend brought you in so quickly, Miss Hopper. Another hour or so and you probably wouldn't have made it."

El was shocked. She looked at Mike. He offered her a warm smile, yet his eyes were shining with tears. As much as he felt like breaking down, he knew he had to be strong and supportive for her.

"As I've mentioned, our primary focus yesterday was to stabilize your condition and make sure you recovered from the hemorrhage as quickly as possible. However, when Mr. Wheeler brought you in, we did perform an M.R.I. to help us locate the source of the hemorrhage, and that's when we discovered the tumour. Now, as I said, the first step will be to determine whether or not it's cancerous. The second step will be to see if it's possible for us to remove the tumour."

"There's a chance you won't be able to remove it?" asked Hopper.

Dr. Epstein nodded again. "Yes. Brain tumours are among the trickiest. It all depends on where in the brain the tumour is located. In Jane's case, I'd say the chances are in her favour, since the tumour is in a spot where it's not putting pressure on the more vital parts of her brain."

Eleven didn't know how to process this information. It felt like her whole world was coming apart. Never in a million years did she ever think this would happen to her. She'd been poked and prodded like a lab rat for the first twelve years of her life, and after a short taste of freedom, it seemed like she was being condemned yet again to spending her days indoors, interacting with doctors, and performing medical tests. Always more tests. It was like being back at Hawkins Lab all over again.

El started to feel queasy as she felt the panic rise within her. Her heart was slamming out of her chest. This couldn't be happening! She kicked herself for believing she would ever be allowed to lead a normal, happy life. Scientists had ruled over her since before she'd even born. Maybe that was her destiny - to be a lab rat until the day that she died. And her death suddenly didn't seem so far away. Hot tears trickled down her face.

"Baby, it's ok," said Hopper, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her into a sideways hug. He kissed the top of her head. "We'll get you through this. I promise."

"You shouldn't promise," replied Eleven in a cracked whisper. "You can't promise it's going to be okay. You don't know." Mike squeezed her hand and wiped his own tears from his face.

"You're right, Miss Hopper. No one should make promises at this point in the process. But the good news is that, if the tumour is benign, we should have no problem removing it, and in that case there's not a chance of remission. So you'd be in the clear, 100%." She felt a sliver of hope at this, but was quick to cast it aside. Hope was useless. She was doomed, and that was it. *Better get used to it now*, she thought bitterly

"And if it's not?" asked Hopper, mirroring her thoughts.

"We can potentially remove the tumour if it's cancerous, depending on Jane's theoretical stage of cancer. The earlier the stage, the better. Tumours usually start out the size of a bean. However, this one seems like it's been present in her brain, and growing, for at least 4 years, which isn't a good sign," explained Dr. Epstein. He paused and looked uneasily at the three of them.

"But here's the thing. Even if we do successfully remove the cancerous tumour, there's about a 75% chance that it can return to other areas of the body in a process called metastasis." Dr. Epstein offered El a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry," he added softly.

Silence in the room. Mike couldn't handle all this negativity.

"Well, how soon can we find out if it's benign or not?" asked Mike, his voice coming out as a croak. "I mean, there's a chance she'll be completely fine, right?"

"Right," confirmed the doctor. "But there's another thing."

El almost felt like laughing. Of course there was another thing. There was always something else.

"What do you mean, another thing?" demanded Hopper, leaning forward in his chair.

Dr. Epstein sighed. "During Jane's M.R.I., we discovered something very unusual. Something we had never seen before. Jane has a

highly-radioactive, metal apparatus connected to the sides of her brain, which we think could have potentially caused this tumour." He checked his clipboard. "Now I understand you don't possess any physical medical record for Jane, Mr. Hopper?"

El was stunned. So were Hopper and Mike. All three of them looked at each other, confused. Radioactive apparatus?

"I... no, I don't. Never have. She was born and raised at Hawkins National Laboratory. After the uh, accident, that happened there a few years ago, they said her medical records were destroyed. The only official document they ever gave me was her birth certificate."

Dr. Epstein nodded. "The metal apparatus connected to her brain, although tiny, is very complex. Seems to be powered by some sort of nuclear substance. My recommendation would be to remove it as soon as possible. But in order to do that, we need to have a better understanding of it. It would help us - immensely, might I add - to know why it was implanted in the first place, how they did it, what it is, exactly. You know, that sort of thing. And we need her medical record in order to have access to that sort of information."

"I know why they put it there," whispered El. She turned to Mike. "That... *thing*... probably helps generate my powers."

"I'm sorry?" asked Dr. Epstein. She looked sideways at her dad.

"It's okay, you need to show him," said Hopper.

El sighed. "Dr. Epstein, don't freak out, okay?" She focused on his pen holder, pushing it back a few inches with her mind. It obeyed, sliding across his desk.

"JESUS CHRIST!" Dr. Epstein cried, rising from his chair at once, almost falling over it in the process.

"She can do so much more than that, Dr. Epstein. She can lift people, cars..." said Mike, purposely leaving out the part about monsters, the Upside Down, and how she created its gate to the underworld.

The blood drained from Dr. Epstein's face. "Is this a practical joke?" he demanded, his eyes darting from Hopper, to El, to Mike.

Hopper took a deep breath. "It's not, I promise you. Jane's biological mother, a woman named Terry Ives, was a test subject in the Hawkins Lab government-sanctioned program MKUltra while she was pregnant with Jane, taking part in experiments involving psychedelic drugs and sensory deprivation. After she was born, Dr. Martin Brenner raised as his own walking science experiment. For twelve years, they trained her to develop the ability to move things with her mind, among other things. I swear to you Dr. Epstein - it may be hard to believe, but this is all too real."

Dr. Epstein blinked, utterly shocked. They all watched as the expression on his face shifted from fear to confusion, then finally, downright fascination.

"Amazing," he breathed. "I knew thought them folks at Hawkins Lab had an air of secrecy about them," he mused, rubbing his chin.

"You don't know the half of it," Mike said under his breath.

"What I'm trying to tell you, Dr. Epstein," El cut in, "is that I think the metal apparatus is what gives me the ability to be able to do all these things. That's why they put it there, so I could become this super-human they could study and use to their advantage. And I'm not the only one they did this to."

Dr. Epstein nodded solemnly, taking a moment to assimilate the information.

"An organization such as Hawkins National Lab would make copies of their patients' - or in this case, subjects - medical files," he said, crossing his hands together and turning to face Hopper. "What I'm saying, Mr. Hopper, is that I'm quite positive they lied to you about her medical file. There must be a copy of it still out there somewhere. I'm sure of it."

Hopper paused to consider this. He scoffed, annoyed at himself for not seeing the truth that was right there in front of him the whole time. "You're right. Absolutely. That makes sense. Those sons of bitches."

"They know far too well how much trouble they'd be in if the truth

came out. If Jane's medical record, and all of their other subjects' medical records, were made public, it would make for a huge scandal. Not that their whole operation isn't controversial enough as it is."

Hopper looked at Dr. Epstein, fire in his eyes. He finally understood where he was going with this. They nodded at each other in unspoken agreement.

"Find a way to get your hands on that file, Mr. Hopper. Whatever it takes."

"Whatever it takes," repeated Hopper affirmatively.

7. Chapter 7

CHAPTER 7

Mike polished off his Budweiser and tossed it on top of the five other empty bottles lying on the ground next to him. He wasn't a big drinker - unlike some of the other guys in his class - and usually restricted his consumption to no more than a couple beers at most. Truth was, he didn't care much for the taste, and mostly did it to fit in during parties (which he very rarely attended.) Recently, Hopper had begun to offer him one or two during barbecue dinners, birthdays or other celebrations. Although Mike didn't enjoy drinking, he always accepted the offer, taking it as a sign of recognition on Hopper's part that he wasn't a child anymore, which he greatly appreciated.

But tonight was different.

Tonight, Mike's plan was to get ripped drunk, and no one was going to stop him. Not even El, who was at Max's for their ritual monthly girls night, most probably watching sappy romance movies and painting their fingernails. When Eleven had come back for good after all of the crazy stuff that happened 3 years ago, Max had been El's first female friend, and had helped her get in touch with her feminine side by taking on the role of mentor. Their girl time had really helped them bond, and even if Max would never admit it, Mike knew she secretly loved it.

Eleven had been released from the hospital immediately after taking the M.R.I. that would indicate whether or not the tumour was cancerous, and Dr. Epstein said they would get the test results back in a week at most, which Mike thought was far too long. Today was Day 4, and he didn't know how he would last another three, seeing as the days seemed to stretch on twice as long as they normally did. Not one minute could go by without him worrying about it, and the wait was downright brutal.

On the first day they'd found out about her tumour, El had been a wreck, which was to be expected. It killed him to see her discouraged and hopeless. He tried his best to stay strong for her, and to remain

positive even though deep down he felt much like she did. He'd held her when she cried, trying to comfort her as best he could by telling her a million times that they would fight through this together, but behind that facade, he was just as pissed off and afraid as she was. Life always found a way to screw them one way or another.

And it was all the Lab's fault. All of it.

Mike unzipped his backpack and reached for the unopened bottle of Jack Daniel's, unscrewed it with his teeth, and spit out the cap. He took a large swig and slammed the bottle down on the ground. He looked across the night sky at the dim lights that shone from Hawkins Lab from his spot at the foot of a nearby hill, not a quarter mile away. How was it that this fucking place still existed? Why had no one burned it to the ground yet? Why hadn't *he*? He scoffed, angry with himself for being such a softie, like Lucas had said. Maybe he should learn to be tougher, and enjoy beer, and beat up the bad guys himself instead of letting his girlfriend to all the work.

He took another swig of Jack Daniels, encouraged by how well his first had gone down. He had expected it to taste awful, it wasn't so bad after all. So he took another. He was starting to feel lightheaded, which he figured was a step in the right direction of getting shitfaced.

"Thank you, Keith," he said out loud, referring to Dustin's old boss and manager of the arcade who had purchased the liquor for him. Of course, there'd been a catch - Keith wanted twice the price for the bottle, and the promise of a date with Nancy, which he's been desperately trying to get for three years. Mike had agreed to it, although there was no way in hell he'd honour that part of the deal.

"What an idiot," he chuckled to himself out loud. Mike had to admit the whiskey was starting to make him feel a little bit better. The negative thoughts were somehow less painful than they'd been an hour ago. He was still worried about El, but his heart didn't hurt as much, and he welcomed the temporary bliss. He took another two swigs of liquor.

Not only had Hawkins Lab stolen Eleven from her family, ruined her childhood by submitting her to years of abuse and isolation, but they had implanted a radioactive device inside her head that would

ultimately give her cancer. They had knowingly condemned her to her die, just so they could weaponize her. Now that Mike knew the truth about El's powers, that they were a poison gift handed to her by the lab instead of a natural superhuman ability she was born with, he wished he would have never encouraged her to use them. Up until recently, he thought they were the coolest thing he'd ever witnessed. Now, he wished they would have never existed.

"ASSHOLES!" he yelled in the direction of the lab, taking another sip of liquor.

How could they do this to innocent children?

Mike didn't usually let himself think about the others. His heart and mind were too preoccupied with El, there was no room for anyone else. But right now, the gates were open. Mike wanted to be angry, to fuel the hatred he had for the Lab, and with it, ignite a fire that would burn them to the ground.

Mike took another swig of Jack and started packing his empty bottles into his bag. He stood up a little too quickly, and struggled to regain his balance, stumbling to the side.

"Woah. Steady." He laughed. It felt good to laugh again.

Then he started walking towards Hawkins Lab.

Jim Hopper was watching a movie at home with Joyce when he heard the phone rang. It was 10:00 pm, which meant it could be two things. One, Eleven, or even Will, calling to speak to his mother. Two, work. It was Friday night, and he was on call this week. Emergencies only - that was the deal.

He sighed, rising from the couch and went to pick up the phone.

"Yeah?"

"Chief, we got a call from Hawkins Lab. Drunk kid throwing broken bottles over the fence. We could handle it, but you said you wanted to take care of any calls regarding Hawkins Lab, so... do you want us to dispatch someone else, or do you want to head over there

yourself?"

Hopper knew exactly which kid it was.

"Let me handle it..." he growled into the phone.

"THAT'S RIGHT! I'M TALKING TO YOU! BIG BOY HIDING INSIDE YOUR SHELTER HUH?" Mike tossed another empty bottle of beer at the Hawkins Lab employee entrance gate.

"FUCK YOU, YOU COWARD! YOU LIKE KILLING KIDS HUH?! WHY DON'T YOU COME OUT HERE AND THROW A FEW PUNCHES AT ME THEN? COME ON, I'M READY FOR YOU!"

Mike tossed another bottle at the man watching him behind the gate, the glass shattering into a million pieces.

"YOU GUYS ARE ASSHOLES!" he yelled.

He heard a car pull up behind him. Mike turned, squinting in the blinding headlights, and almost fell over as he took a few steps towards it, trying to see who was sitting behind the wheel.

Then he saw Hopper step out of the car.

"Oh shit," he said, a little too loudly.

"You got that right," responded Hopper. He sighed as he took in the sight before him. He'd come over with every intention to rip Mike apart. But looking at him now, he couldn't bring himself to do it. He had never seen Mike look so terrible, and not only because he was, indeed, very drunk. There was an air of desperation about him, and he just couldn't let himself stay mad at him. Truthfully, his heart ached for the kid.

"Just get in," said Hopper.

"No, I'm not getting in the car with you. You're just gonna - you're just gonna take me home, or take me to the station, or worse. I'm staying here to give those assholes what they deserve." Mike slurred his words to the point where Hopper could barely discern what he

was saying.

"YOU HEAR ME TALKING, YOU FUCKING PRICK?" he yelled at the gate employee, loud and clear this time.

"Alright, that's enough," he said, and grabbed Mike by the collar of his shirt, dragging him back to his patrol car.

"Okay, okay. Jeez. YOU WIN THIS TIME YOU SONS OF BITCHES! I'LL COME BACK FOR YOU!" Mike hollered before being forced inside the car by Hopper.

Mike couldn't stay silent for long. The alcohol was making him feel way too chatty.

"Are you taking me to the station?" he asked.

Hopper paused before giving him an answer. "I should. Because you're acting a damn fool right now. But no, I'm not."

Mike felt a wave of relief wash over him, as well as one of nausea, what with all these winding roads between the lab and the city of Hawkins.

"Okay. But please don't take me home. You can just drop me off at the park or something. I really, really don't want to go home. My mom will freak out if she sees me like this, and Nancy will lecture me. And I can't handle either of them right now."

"You're damn straight I'm taking you home. There's no way in hell I'm bringing you back to my place in the state you're in. Joyce would be way too upset. Plus, she'll probably blame me for it. You do know the whole point of me offering you a beer every once in a blue moon was for you to learn to drink responsibly, right?" said Hopper, glancing over at Mike with darts in his eyes. He turned to face the road again, shaking his head in disapproval. Mike swallowed hard.

"I know, and I'm sorry okay? I really am. But I just hate them so much, Jim. I hate them so much." His voice cracked at the last words. Hopper looked sideways at him again, and Mike was covering his mouth with the back of his hand as he looked straight ahead, his eyes

shining with tears.

Hopper felt a pang of sadness in his heart again. Damn the kid for making him feel sorry for him. He tried to get angry again, but to no avail.

"I understand. I hate them too," he finally conceded.

"They ruined her. They took this beautiful, sweet, perfect child, and they ruined her Jim. And now she's sick. And it's all their fault."

Hopper felt his heart seize in his chest. What Mike was saying was all true. He couldn't blame the kid for being upset. Hopper knew how much Mike truly cared for his daughter. And although they didn't always see eye to eye on certain things, he knew for a fact that Mike loved Eleven more than life itself, and would do anything to protect her.

"I know, Mike. They're sick fucks. And they'll get what's coming for them. We're gonna take them down. You, me, El. We're going back there and we're getting her file. And then we're gonna stick them with a lawsuit. And if the lawsuit fails, then I'll burn the building down myself. But we can't do any of that if you're being damn stupid and irresponsible. This isn't you, Mike. You have to hold it together, kid. For her." He knew he would strike a cord in Mike when he said this. Truly, he didn't want to punish him. What he wanted was to get through to him, so he could get his act together and focus.

Mike stayed silent for a minute. "You're right, I'm sorry."

Hopper couldn't help it. "Must have felt good though, right?" he asked, the tiniest of smiles creeping upon his lips.

"So good." Mike laughed.

"But this isn't the way to let it out, kid. Trust me. I'm angry too. This is my second time dealing with a sick child. And trust me, it's the worst feeling in the world to have to go through all this shit again."

Mike felt himself sober up a few notches. He had completely forgotten about Sarah, Hopper's first daughter that died five years ago. Of cancer.

"Jim I... I'm sorry. I didn't even... I didn't...."

"It's okay, kid."

There were no words to describe how guilty Mike felt for not even considering what Hopper must be going through. The man may be tough on him sometimes, but Mike still had a lot of respect for him. And most importantly, he was family.

The nausea returned in full swing. The passing cars' headlights lights were suddenly way too bright, and the world began to spin before him.

"Jim, pull over."

Eleven quickly made her way across the Wheeler yard, keeping her head and body down as low as she could. It was past midnight, but the lights were still on in the living room. Her dad had told her what had happened tonight, and although she knew Mike needed to be left alone to sleep it off, she desperately wanted to go check on him.

Upon reaching the right side of the house, she gently levitated her way up to Mike's window, and opened it. She stepped inside, and saw Mike passed out on his bed, fully clothed, with a trash can beside him. The entire room reeked of alcohol. She sighed, and worked on removing his shoes. Then she flicked off the lamp and took her place next to him in his bed.

She stroked his cheek, feeling a pang in her heart. It was so unlike Mike to get wasted and be so reckless, but El knew he was only acting like this because he was hurting and lashing out. Still, it hurt her to see him so broken.

She pressed his forehead to his, and closed her eyes.

8. Chapter 8

CHAPTER 8

El shut the car door and looked up at Hawkins National Laboratory, which towered before her, as gloom and terrifying as she remembered it to be - especially in this rainy, grey weather. It was never easy for her to return here, and every time she did, El prayed it would be the last.

But it never was.

Mike appeared at her side. "You okay?" he asked, his brown eyes filled with worry.

El gave him an uneasy look. "Yeah. I guess."

Mike took her hand in his and have it a gentle rub with his thumb. "You got this," he told her softly. El gave him a firm nod and laced her fingers through his.

"Ready?" asked Hopper.

"Yes," she said. "Let's do this."

They made their way into the building. Her dad had made Mike wear a cap and a pair of his old glasses from the 70's, hoping they would help conceal his identity after last night's episode. Frankly, he thought he looked stupid and hated every minute of it, but knew he had to suck it up. El, on the other hand, thought he looked cute with glasses. But then again, she thought he looked cute pretty much all the time.

"May I help you?" the stern-looking woman at the reception asked, eyeing them suspiciously.

"Yeah. You can. I have an appointment with Dr. Owens. Jim Hopper."

The woman checked something on her computer. She grabbed the phone and dialed a number.

"Dr. Owens, I've got Jim Hopper waiting at the reception." She hung up and turned towards Hopper again. "8th floor, second door to the right."

They made their way towards Dr. Owens' office. El tried to stay calm as they navigated the familiar corridors, but every corner seemed to jog her memory, and she kept getting flashbacks of her past life. It was terrifying. Mike sensed her discomfort and reached for her hand, keeping closer to her as they walked.

"Mr. Hopper! Jane! Michael! So good to see you three!" Dr. Owens rose from his desk to greet them as they appeared in the doorframe of his office. He shook their hands vigorously, and gestured for them to walk right in and have a seat.

"So. Jane. How are you?" Dr. Director beamed at El when all three of them were seated before him. "What brings you here today?"

"Actually that's what we came here to see you for, doctor," said Hopper, interjecting. "Jane has a tumour on her brain. The size of a golf ball." The smile quickly disappeared from Dr. Owens face.

"What?" he asked.

"Yeah. You heard me. All thanks to that... what did they call it, Jane?"

"Radioactive metal apparatus," said El flatly, looking dead on at Dr. Owens.

"Yeah, that thing you guys put into her brain as a child. It may have given her cancer."

Dr. Owens shifted in his seat. "I'm so sorry to hear that," he said, turning towards El with a grave expression on his face.

"Like hell you are," Mike muttered under his breath. He didn't trust Dr. Owens.

"We came for her medical file," continued Hopper, ignoring him. "I know you said you didn't have it after what happened here. You said some files were destroyed, yada yada yada. But surely, you must have

a copy."

Dr. Owens let out a dry laugh. "If we would've had a copy, Jim, I would have given it to you. Unfortunately, Jane's file was a highly classified one, and we weren't permitted to make a copy of it. I'm sorry. I know that's not what you want to hear." He quickly resumed his serious demeanor, and to Mike it was confirmation that this whole shtick was an act on his part. He wasn't sorry, and he wasn't surprised - he knew damn well this could - would - happen eventually.

"No, it's not. Listen. The doctor at Hawkins General needs that file in order to remove that toxic device you screwed into her skull. So if you don't have her file, maybe you could give us the protocol you followed to insert it, or the model design for it, or whatever the fuck else you could give us that could help us remove it." Hopper wasn't messing around, and Mike lived for it.

Dr. Owens crossed his hands over his desk. "I'm sorry, Jim. I can't do that. We're not allowed to hand out information about our procedures. They're classified."

Hopper scoffed. "That's a bunch of bullshit. You just want to protect yourself and all the shady ass experiments you've got going on here. Like you always have."

Mike laughed. He couldn't have said it better himself. Dr. Owens glared at him in annoyance, and Mike offered him a sarcastic smile in return. It was taking every inch of self-control he had to remain quiet.

"Surely, we can't be the first folks to come in here with a similar problem, doctor."

Dr. Owens tried as best he could to appear shocked at the accusation. "Yes, you are."

"Bullcrap," said Mike through gritted teeth.

"Mr. Wheeler, you should stay out of this."

"No, he's *not* going to stay out of it," said El defensively. "He's

concerned about me, and loves me, which is more than I can say about any of you in this stupid lab. I want my file, Dr. Owens. Please. It's the last thing I'm every going to ask of you. Not that I ever asked much in the first place."

This seemed to shake him a little bit. He looked over at El, a torn expression on his face.

"I'm really sorry, Jane. Truly - I am. But I can't help you. I hope you don't blame me, personally, seeing as I wasn't here when they did this to you. You should know that we don't practice this sort of operation since I took over the Lab, three years ago."

"Yeah, 'cause you got exposed," interjected Mike.

Dr. Owens squinted at him. He opened his mouth to say something, but closed it.

"So there's no copy of the file, and there's nothing you can do to help us? That's your final answer?" asked Hopper.

Dr. Owens shook his head. "I'm really, really sorry Jim. I hope all three if you can find it in your hearts to forgive me someday."

Hopper rose from his chair. Mike and Eleven quickly followed after him, scrambling from their seats. "You see, Dr. Owens, forgiveness isn't my forte. Especially when it comes to wrongdoings against my daughter. I hope you can find it in your stone heart to understand that," he added, mockingly.

"Oh, and by the way, I hope you're ready for the lawsuit coming your way," he added, halfway out the door.

They were pulling out of the Lab parking lot when El broke the silence.

"I have another idea," she said. "There was this woman, Brenner's assistant. Her name is Linda Bryant. She would file his papers for him, assist him in all his procedures, bring my meals up to my room, that sort of thing. When I was really young, she used to give me my baths, dress me, feed me. We did everything together, and she was

the nicest person to me while I was here - the most human. She might know where they keep the classified medical files, and she could be willing to help. I'm sure of it."

Hopper and Mike both turned to look at Eleven, dumbfounded.

"And you haven't said anything before?" asked Hopper.

"I couldn't remember her last name. But it hit me just now when we were walking out. Linda Bryant," she repeated, savouring the name on her tongue.

"El, that's perfect," said Mike, reaching over to touch her shoulder from the backseat. "This is exactly what we needed." He felt himself regain hope. El tilted her head towards him and offered him a bright smile, placing her hand over his.

"Okay. I'm going to need to do some research at the station, see if I can find out where she lives. Where do you want me to drop you off?"

"We could go to my place," replied Mike almost immediately. "My parents and Nancy are at work."

El turned to look at Mike, eyes wide. Hopper glared at him in the rearview mirror. Suddenly, he realized how that might have sounded to him.

"No! I meant in the sense that my parents are always fighting, and it's just nice to be able to enjoy the silence for once. We could watch a movie in peace," offered Mike sheepishly, turning beet red.

Hopper continued to steal threatening glances at him through the rearview mirror. El bite her lip as she looked out the window, trying not to laugh.

"Yeah. That better be what's on your mind," growled Hopper.

Mike usually liked rainy days. They usually meant for down time with Eleven, where they would often stay indoors to play games and watch movies from inside their beloved blanket fort in the Wheeler

basement, which they had made bigger and better with time. Since Ted basically spent his entire life watching TV from his lazy boy in the living room, Karen had gotten another TV for the basement, and Mike was thrilled. The basement was pretty much off limits to any other family member, ever since Mike had claimed it with his friends a few years ago, and would continue to claim until the day he moved out. Even Karen and Nancy knocked before coming down for laundry or cleaning. He liked to think that when the time would come for him to leave the house, he would pass down his little sister, hoping Holly would enjoy the privacy and exclusivity of the basement with her own friends and use it as much as he had when he was a child.

However, today was Day 5 of waiting, which meant that in two days, they'd be getting El's test results back, and the dreary weather seemed to make him even more depressed and anxious. Instead of using this time to mentally prepare himself for the worst, Mike had spent the four previous days in denial, trying to convince himself - and El - that everything would be okay. He was hoping and praying that she would be fine, however, realistically, there was favorable chance that she wouldn't be. And he wasn't ready to deal with it. He would never be ready to deal with it. If El was really sick, then he didn't want to think about living anymore. Life without El simply wasn't worth it. He would lose the love of his life, as well as his best friend. There would never be another for him.

Mike decided to stop thinking about it again, and tried to focus on the movie they were currently watching. They were cuddling under a sea of covers and pillows, El's head pressed against his chest.

"I'm so scared, Mike," she whispered, facing the TV. "I can't stop thinking about it."

Mike gently stroked her back. "I'm scared too," he admitted. "I couldn't live without you."

She turned her head to look into his eyes. "Please don't say that."

Mike said nothing. He didn't want to argue about it. Plus, he didn't want to cause her any more stress.

"Mike, I'm serious. I don't want to hear you say stuff like that. You'll

be okay." She didn't quite believe it herself when she said it, but she still needed to say it.

"I'll always be with you, no matter what happens to me. I'll find a way to reach the Upside Down. I'll find my way back to you."

"Promise?" he whispered in a broken voice. El rested her chin on his chest, and reached up to gently stroke the side of his face.

"Promise."

Mike closed his eyes as leaned into her hand, hot tears flowing down his cheeks. El scooted upwards and kissed him, taking his face into her hands.

"I'll always come back to you, Mike," she said. "I'll never let you go."

"El, stop," he said, wiping the tears from his face. "Let's not have this conversation until we absolutely need to have it, okay? I can't think about it. I just can't."

El bit her lip. "Okay," she conceded.

A knock at the door. Mike gently moved El aside and sprang from the bed, jogging up the stairs until he reached the front door. It was Hopper.

"I found her," he said. "Let's go."

9. Chapter 9

CHAPTER 9

Linda Bryant's house was a modest one-story bungalow, situated somewhat deep into the woods on the outskirts of town. Its simplicity took El by surprise, seeing as Hawkins Lab employees were well-off in terms of salary and benefits. Yet there was nothing flashy about Linda's house or her 1984 Volkswagen Rabbit, parked in her dirt path driveway.

Mike studied their surroundings as he stepped out of the car. "I don't know what I was expecting... but this wasn't it," he declared, mirroring her thoughts.

They made their way towards the porch. Eleven took a deep breath, and knocked three times.

They waited. She knocked again. This time, they listened closely to see if they could make out any sounds coming from inside the house. But it was dead silent.

"Come on," said El, knocking several more times.

"The patrol car could have freaked her out, maybe she's hiding? Should we just go in?" pressed Mike, impatient.

"Kid, you can't go in someone's house without a warrant. Psychic powers or no. That's basic cop knowledge."

Mike knew this, of course, but figured it was worth a try anyway.

After five minutes of waiting they decided to turn around and head home, deflated, but ready to plan out their next move, whatever it may be. As they were approaching the car, a voice came from behind them.

"May I help you, officer?"

All three of them turned on their heels. A woman, aged about 50, stood before them wearing a sunhat and overalls. She was holding a

bucket of water in one hand, and some sort of gardening tool in the other.

The blood drained from her face when she recognized Eleven.

"Jane," she breathed, eyes wide.

"Linda," said El, taking a tentative step towards her.

Linda stood frozen before them, still gawking at El.

"I... You... You're.. so grown up.. You're..." she stammered, absent-mindedly depositing the bucket of water at her feet, not taking her eyes off Eleven.

"It's good to see you, Linda," offered El, unsure what to do or say next. She was glad when Linda made the first move, and closed in the distance between them to pull her into a big hug.

"I'm so sorry, Jane. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me," she repeated over and over, her eyes shut tightly as she squeezed El harder.

"It's okay, Linda," said El, patting her on the back. "I know it wasn't you."

"But I let it happen. I should have quit sooner. I should have reported him to the police, I should have...I..." she trailed off, interrupted by her own sobs.

Eleven gently freed herself from Linda's embrace and grabbed her by the shoulders. "It's okay, Linda. I don't blame you. But I do need your help."

Linda got a hold of herself and focused. "What? What is it?"

"I think we better go inside," interjected Hopper. "You might want to sit down for this, ma'am."

"I'm in," said Linda, after taking a sip from her coffee. She had brewed a fresh pot for everyone, and to El's surprise, Mike had actually taken her up on the offer. He was still feeling groggy and

tired after last night, and quite frankly needed the pick-me-up. He figured caffeine would help. Plus, with a ton of cream and sugar, he actually enjoyed it. Eleven, on the other hand, had declined the coffee, but agreed to a cup of tea.

"Really?" said El, breathing a sigh of relief. They had just gone over the plan with her, which was to infiltrate Hawkins Lab, steal Owen's pass, and use Linda's knowledge of the Lab administration to retract El's medical file.

"Of course," affirmed Linda. "There's nothing I wouldn't do to bring those sick bastards down, once and for all. Especially after what they did to you, and how you could be.. Well, the tumour could..." she trailed off, eyes brimming with tears.

The news of El's predicament had hit her pretty hard. She had burst into a terrible fit of sobs, and El had to comfort her for a good ten minutes before she could get her to calm down. Mike thought it was absolutely ridiculous that El had to be the one to soothe her, but kept his mouth shut about it. Linda seemed like a nice enough woman, and he was glad she was willing to help. She obviously felt terrible about her past involvement at the lab, but he still kind of wanted to shake her and tell her to get a grip.

"So. One more time," said Hopper. "We get to the lab, we find Owens. We steal his pass, take him with us. You take us to the classified administration section of the lab and show us to her file. And then we get the hell out out. El's job will be to keep the guards at bay, without touching them. So they won't have any physical wounds. The worst that will happen is we'll be charged for breaking and entering. They won't be able to pin us with theft, since Jane and I have the legal right to her medical file, and they're the ones withholding the evidence."

Linda seemed please with this, and it didn't seem to bother her one bit that she'd be breaking the law.

"Sounds good to me," she said.

"Great. Thank you so much, Linda," said El, smiling warmly at her as she placed a hand over Linda's.

Linda beamed at her in return. "I'm so glad I can help, Jane. This is my chance at redemption. God has answered my prayers," she added quietly, glancing upwards.

"We'll do it tonight," said Hopper. "We just met with Owens around 2pm, and that was the earliest meeting I could get with him. Which means he'll probably be working late."

Mike nodded. He felt the tingly sensation of adrenaline course through his body. Even under the unfortunate circumstances, he was excited to be breaking into the Lab again. It felt just like old times. Minus the life-threatening hordes of demo-dogs and menace of an all-consuming gate to the underworld.

"Tonight," he said, looking sideways at El. She nodded firmly at him, and took his hand under the table.

They stayed over at Linda's for dinner. She had insisted several times before Hopper finally agreed that it would be much simpler for all four of them to leave for the Lab together.

Linda, as it turned out, was a widow. Her husband had passed two years ago from lung cancer. She had sold their house, quit her job, and was now living full-time at her cabin, where she could entertain her gardening hobby.

"Keeps me busy, keeps my mind off things," she had told them. She'd taken up a part-time job at the hardware store, not 10 miles from the cabin.

"Never thought I'd be returning to that dreadful place," she said as they were finishing up dessert, a piece of her homemade lemon meringue pie. "I swear, just thinking about going back gives me the creeps. You know, I had nightmares about Martin Brenner for quite a long time after I left the Lab. The kind of nightmares that wake you up, screaming, covered in sweat."

"You and me both," said El quietly. Linda offered her a weak smile.

"What happened to him, anyway?" she asked.

"Demogorgon got him," Mike responded.

"Demo-what?"

"Do you remember the creature I used to see when they'd make me cross over to other dimension? The one I kept having nightmares about as a child. I used to draw it, too. Tall, ugly..."

"Faceless?" Linda shuddered at the thought. "Well-deserved fate, if you ask me. You mess with the supernatural, that's what you get," she said, sipping on her tea. "I tried to tell him he was going too far. But he wouldn't listen. He wouldn't listen to anyone."

"Brenner was bat-shit crazy," said Mike. "Owens isn't like that. He's still not a good person, but at least he's not a complete psycho."

Linda nodded. "At least."

"Thank you so much for having us over for dinner, Mrs. Bryant," said Hopper. "But we should get going." Eleven glanced down at her wristwatch. It was 7:00 pm. She was nervous, but ready.

"Of course," said Linda, rising from her seat. "I'll just clean this up real quick, and we'll head out."

"Let me help you with the dishes," offered El.

Linda reached over and touched her face, her eyes shining with tears. "You're too kind, my sweet."

When El and Linda had gone to the kitchen, Mike turned to Hopper.

"You think she can pull this off? She seems a bit..."

"Fragile?" offered Hopper. "I know. But I think she'll pull through."

Mike nodded. They could only hope for the best.

The time had finally come for them to ride off in Linda's Rabbit. The plan was to enter the Lab premises under the excuse that Hopper had left his driver's license at the reception, and was coming to retrieve it.

He was trying to pass Linda off as his wife. Joyce hadn't gone to the lab in three years, and he was hoping no one would remember what she looked like.

"Hold," the man at the gate yelled as they approached.

"Okay, everyone take your positions," muttered Hopper. He reached over and placed his hand on Linda's thigh. Mike and El had received strict instructions from Hopper not to hold hands, since they were supposed to be siblings in order for his plan to run as smoothly as possible.

"State your business," said the gate employee as they pulled up to the gate.

"Good evening," greeted Hopper from the passenger seat window. "I'm Sheriff Jim Hopper, Hawkins County. I came in here earlier to meet with Dr. Owens, concerning my daughter who used to be a patient here." He gestured to Eleven in the backseat. The man shifted his attention to El, who was smiling sweetly at him.

"I forgot my driver's license at the reception when I registered. Came to retrieve it with my wife and kids straight after dinner. We were going out to the movies when I realized I didn't have it in my wallet." He laughed.

The gate employee frowned as he studied them closely. Hopper's hand was still placed on Linda's thigh, and they tried as best as they could to look like a normal, happy family.

"We'll be in and right out. You can confirm with the reception if you prefer. They're expecting us," added Hopper.

The man said nothing as he circled the car, inspecting the license plate.

"Could you pop the trunk for me, ma'am?" he asked.

"Sure thing," replied Linda, obeying.

The man checked the trunk, then closed it. He got on the ground to look under the car. Mike and El exchanged a nervous glance. They

had nothing to hide, but he was being overly suspicious. This wasn't good.

At last, he returned to the driver seat window.

"Okay. 5 minutes," he said, and went to open the gate. El wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, but she held it in.

"Thank you, sir. In and out," said Hopper, and offered him a friendly hand gesture as they passed. Linda beamed at him, and El and Mike could only manage a nervous smile.

When they had cleared the gate area and parked, Mike looked over at El and sighed deeply as he took her hand in his. "That was *way* too close."

"That was the easiest part," said Hopper as he detached his seat belt and turned to face them. "Let's do this."

10. Chapter 10

CHAPTER 10

The four of them walked into the Lab reception area. Luckily, it was empty, except for the receptionist working behind her desk.

"Take out the cameras," Hopper told Eleven through gritted teeth. Her eyes darting around the ceiling, following his gaze, and one by one the cameras crumbled to the ground in flames.

"What in the hell?" exclaimed the receptionist, rising from her seat. She turned her attention to Hopper, El, Mike and Linda.

"Who are you people?" she asked them, apparent fear in her eyes.

Eleven took two step towards her. "We're not going to hurt you, okay?" The woman shrieked, her arm jerking violently as she tried to fight the unseen force that was taking control of her body. El adjusted her telekinetic hold on her, and the woman slapped her hand over her mouth.

"Now, Mike," commanded El.

Mike appeared at her side, producing a roll of masking tape from his hoodie pocket. He ran over to the receptionist.

"I'm really sorry," he told her, an uneasy expression on his face as he began to tape her mouth. "We just can't afford to have you call security, or the police. I swear, we'll come back to untie you later." The woman sobbed, looking pleadingly at him as he wound the tape around her wrists.

"Know where the keys are for this door?" Hopper asked her, pointing to a nearby broom closet. The woman nodded vigorously, motioning to her top desk drawer. Mike rummaged through it vigorously, and pulled out a set of 3 small keys.

"Is this it?" he asked her, holding them up. She nodded. Mike ran over to the broom closet and fumbled with the keys until he found the right one. The door unlocked.

"Again, ma'am, we're really sorry about this," apologized Hopper as he lifted the woman from her chair and walked her to the broom closet. "30 minutes, tops. I promise we're not going to leave you like this." Her eyes widened when she realized they were going to lock her in, and was mumbling something, panicked, when Mike shut the door and locked it behind him.

"Well that's something I never thought I'd do," he muttered, placing the keys in his front jeans pocket.

Hopper turned to Linda. "Where's the telecom room? We have to take out the rest of the cameras."

"Right here on the first floor," she replied. "Let's go."

They made their way down two sets of corridors, Eleven blowing up every camera they passed on the way. Luckily, they didn't meet anyone in the hallway. Upon reaching the telecom room, El used her powers to unlock the door. It creaked open.

"Unplug every single wire," instructed Hopper as they rushed in. They all got to work, undoing each wire from its socket. The various TV's and computer screens went out one by one.

"Good. Let's go find Owens."

They hurried to the elevators. Linda pressed the button over and over until the elevator dinged to a stop. Two men stepped out in lab coats, eyeing them suspiciously, and kept on staring at them until the doors closed.

"Should I have taken them out?" asked El, turning to Hopper.

"I don't know. Let's hope they're too busy to cry wolf," mused Hopper.

They arrived on the eighth floor. The dimly lit corridor was eerily empty, except for a woman entering a room at the very end of the hallway. They waited for her to disappear from sight before stepping out of the elevator.

"Is it just me, or this could have gone a lot worse," whispered Mike as they tiptoed their way to Dr. Owens' office.

"So far so good," mumbled Hopper.

They lined up side by side along the wall before entering his office. "Go," mouthed Hopper to El, and she rushed into his office.

"Jane," said Owens, rising from his desk, alarmed. "What are you doing here?" El used her powers to strip him of his lab coat. It flew right into her hands.

"Saving my life," she replied, telekinetically backing him up against the wall. "Now!" she yelled. Hopper, Mike, and Linda rushed into the room, closing the door behind them. She tossed the lab coat to Linda, and Linda quickly put it on.

"Nice to see you again, Dr. Owens," said Mike as he not-so-delicately slapped a piece of tape onto his mouth.

Dr. Owens mumbled furiously through the tape, desperately trying to free himself from Eleven's psychokinetic grasp, to no avail. He looked from Hopper to Mike to El, eyes widened in panic. Hopper took a few steps towards him, and crouched down to his level.

"You only have yourself to blame, Doctor," he said, pronouncing each word very clearly, looking him straight in the eyes.

"We could have done this the easy way. Make sure you think about that while you sit here," he added as he grabbed Dr. Owens by the arm and threw him back into his seat. Mike got to work on taping him to the legs of his chair.

"Gonna need this, thanks," he said as he unclipped Owens' access pass from his belt and handed it to Linda, while El disconnected his computer and phone. Dr. Owens could only stare at them, dumbfounded as they rushed out of his office, ready to take on the final part of their plan.

Hopper shut the door behind them. "Okay. Restricted section."

"20th floor," said Linda. "Come on."

Thankfully, they made the short jog to the elevators without encountering anyone in the hallway. The ride up the twelve floors

dragged on in silence, all of them praying they wouldn't have to stop on the way to let people on. On the 18th floor, the elevator came to a stop, and the doors opened. A man and a woman stood before them, visibly baffled at the sight of Hopper, El, and Mike. After a brief moment of hesitation, they reluctantly stepped in.

As the doors closed, the man reached over to press the button that would take them to the 20th floor, and froze when he realized it had already been activated. He barely had the time to share a look with his colleague before El and Hopper pounced. Hopper covered the man's mouth, backing him into the corner of the elevator, while El used her powers to disable the woman. Mike went to work taping their mouth and hands, and within ten seconds, they had reached the 20th floor, both of the Lab employees detained. They ran to the nearest office. El unlocked the door, and all six of them hustled into the room. Their hostages stared at them in shock, but surprisingly kept quiet.

Hopper reopened the door ever so slightly, looking to see if the corridor was empty. There was no one, except for two guards on duty at the very end of the corridor, standing before two very large glass doors.

"Is that the Restricted Section?" he whispered to Linda. She appeared at his side, and took a peek.

"Yeah, that's it," she replied in a hushed voice. Hopper shut the door quietly.

"We gotta take out the guards," he explained, removing the man's lab coat to put it on himself. He unfastened the man's access pass from his waistband and clipped it onto his belt.

"They're armed, so we'll have to do this quickly. El, first you'll slide their guns over to me and Linda. Then you hold back the one on the left, I'll take the other one. Mike, you know what you have to do." Mike nodded.

"On three. One, two, three..."

All four of them rushed out of the room. They ran down the corridor

was longer than they had anticipated. It took a moment for the guards to realize what was happening.

"Hold!" one of them called as they approached, lifting his gun. El reached out at them with both hands, calling for their weapons with her mind. They immediately whipped out of the guards' grasp and slid over to Hopper and Linda.

"So badass," came Mike's voice from behind her. El flashed him a quick smile before shifting her focus back to the guard, backing him into the wall with his hands over his head. Hopper advanced on the second guard, gun pointed straight at him. Mike ran over to the guards and began taping their mouths, then hands. Hopper grabbed the taller, bigger guard by the arm once he had finished.

"Let's take them to the others," he instructed.

Linda pointed her gun to the other guard's back. "Move it. Let's go."

They obeyed, walking back to the office where the other employees were being held. Hopper made them sit, and Mike began to tape their ankles.

"You stay here with them," Hopper told him. "El, Linda, and I will go get the file."

"What?" said El, a look of panic on her face. "We're not leaving him here. What if something happens to him?"

Mike pulled her into a hug, then took her face in his hands as he released her. "El, you have to. I'll be fine," he told her softly, brushing her cheek with his thumb. She leaned into his touch.

"I don't think like it," she replied.

"I don't like it either. But we have to do this," he admitted, smiling weakly at her. "Go kick ass for the last time."

She returned the smile. "Okay."

"Mike, if we don't come back in 20 minutes, run out. Do you understand?" asked Hopper.

Mike nodded. "Yeah."

El bit her lip, worried, as she unfastened Mike's old watch from her wrist and handed it to him. She grabbed him by the neck and pulled him into a deep kiss. Mike grabbed her by the waist and pulled her body closer to him, kissing her back passionately, not caring that there were 6 other people in the room right now, including 5 complete strangers and his girlfriend's dad.

"Guys. Let's go. We don't have time for this," pressed Hopper. El rolled her eyes, and reluctantly let go of Mike. He grabbed her arm as she walked past him.

"Be careful," he warned her, his brown eyes boring down into hers, pleading.

El offered him a reassuring smile. "Promise."

They three of them walked back out into the hallway. El's heart sank to her stomach, not having made ten steps that she was already worried sick about leaving Mike behind. She tried to push it aside, and focus on the task at hand. She told herself over and over that he would be fine - they had used up three rolls of tape. The detained employees weren't going anywhere. They would hurry and find her file as quickly as possible, then go back for Mike. And then they would get the hell out of the Lab, and never, ever return. She promised this to herself, right then and there.

Linda slid her pass under the access card reader. The light went from red to green, and the doors slid open.

El gasped when they entered the Restricted Section. The place was huge, almost as big as a football field, with rows upon rows of shelves stacked with boxes and drawers.

Hopper appeared next to her. "Jesus," he whispered, awe-struck as he took in their surroundings.

"Come on," said Linda as she jogged past them, and in that moment, El realized how fortunate they were to have her on their side. Never in a million years would they have been able to find her file in time

without Linda's help.

They followed Linda down several rows of shelves, turned right, then left twice. They went up a flight of stairs, and ended up before another glass door that led to some sort of computer lab. Linda scanned her pass again, and pushed open the door. She sat down at the nearest computer.

"We'll need Owens' all-access pass for this. Come on, fork it over," she told Hopper. He unclipped it immediately, handing it to her.

"What are we doing in here? Shouldn't we be looking in those boxes?" he asked her, perplexed.

"You got all night?" she countered, glancing at him over her shoulder. "No way, it would take too long. Plus, they don't keep the subjects medical files on paper. Not since they got exposed. Way too risky. In case they get raided again, you know?"

Hopper nodded. "Makes sense, yeah."

Linda typed away. She had to scan the card twice, and enter a bunch of numbers from Owen's ID pass before she could finally access the file.

"Bingo! Ives-Hopper, Jane. You're here," Linda beamed at Eleven.

El was so relieved, she thought she would cry. Her dad let out a laugh and pulled her into a hug, holding her so tight she could barely breathe. They both jumped when they heard the printer start.

Hopper wiped the tears from his face. "I don't even know how to begin to thank you, Linda."

She offered him a brief smile. "You can thank me again later, when we're out of here," she responded.

An idea occurred to El. Or rather, struck her like lightning. "Hey, Linda - maybe we could print out a couple more files. You know, as evidence for our lawsuit."

Hopper turned to look at her, wide-eyed. "El. You're a genius, kid."

"Okay, but only a couple more. We have to get out of here," she said.

El only knew one other person that was like her. Her sister from another mother. "Start with Kali Prasad."

Linda typed in *Prasad* into the computer and Kali's picture appeared on the screen, followed by 10 pages of medical script.

"We've only got time for one more," said Linda.

"Terry Ives," said El, a lump in her throat. She looked over at her dad. "I'm sorry. I need to know the truth. I want to know exactly what they did to her."

Hopper pulled her to his side and placed his arm around her. "Don't apologize, baby. It's okay. It's the right thing to do."

They waited in silence, the printer working on overdrive as it spit out page after page.

"Come on, come on," whispered Linda, nervously drumming her fingers on the desk. After 10 excruciatingly long minutes, their work was finally done. Linda made a few clicks on the computer and logged out, while El grabbed the papers from the printer.

"We have to get out of here," pressed Linda. "Now."

They jogged all the way back to the corridor, and headed for the office where Mike was holding their hostages captive.

El knocked on the door. "Mike, it's us. Come on!"

Almost immediately, Mike opened the door. "El," he said softly, pulling her into a hug. She squeezed him back with all her might, allowing herself to rest her head on his chest for a few seconds, overcome with relief that he was safe.

"Let's go, let's go!" called Hopper, holding the elevator door open for them.

The rode down in silence. As soon as they had stepped foot onto the first floor, the alarm went off, causing them to jump.

"I forgot how loud that thing was!" shouted Linda over her shoulder, covering her ears.

Mike ran over to the broom closet and unlocked the door. He helped the receptionist to her feet and reached over to her desk to grab a pair of scissors. He cut her wrists and ankles free, and removed the tape from her mouth.

"Really sorry about all this," he repeated. She opened her mouth to speak, but they were already out the door.

"Freeze!" two guards shouted as they stepped foot in the parking lot. "Stay where you are!"

All four of them rose their hands in the air. El squinted at them, and their weapons flew out of their hands. They hit two cars in the parking lot, one of them crashing through the windshield. Car alarms went off in the distance. The guards looked at each other, shocked.

"Get down on the ground right now, hands behind your head, and you won't get hurt," said Hopper, advancing towards them.

They obeyed immediately. Hopper, Linda, Mike and El ran to Linda's Rabbit.

"Go, go, go!" cried Linda from the passenger seat. Hopper stepped on the gas pedal. El used her powers to blow up the gate, and they were off in a flash.

When the Lab was out of sight, Linda interrupted the silence by bursting into a fit of giggles. Shortly after, they were all howling with laughter, ecstatic.

"I can't believe you guys pulled that off," said Mike.

"We did it," corrected El, lacing her fingers through his. She rested her head on his shoulder, and he rested his head on top of hers.

The fight was far from over, but things were finally looking up.

11. Chapter 11

CHAPTER 11

Hopper, Eleven and Mike sat in Dr. Epstein's office, waiting in silence for him to arrive. The hospital had called early in the morning - El's test results had finally come in, and they wanted Hopper and El to come to the hospital to discuss them in person. Hopper begged the administrative assistant over the phone to tell him if it was good news or bad news, but she'd adamantly refused to tell him, explaining that she wasn't allowed to divulge any information before getting the doctor's approval. It had left all three of them feeling uneasy and anxious.

"Jim, Jane, Michael," said Dr. Epstein as he walked into his office, papers in hand. He closed the door behind him and immediately went to sit at his desk. Mike tried to read his face for any indication of whether he was about to ruin his life or make it, but the doctor's facial expression remained neutral. Mike figured he probably had a lot of practice with his poker face in regards to his patients.

All three of them remained quiet, staring at Dr. Epstein in suspended animation as he flipped through the pages in his folder.

"I'm just double-checking... okay... yes, all is good," he mused quietly.

Mike thought he was going to lose it. It was taking every inch of self-control for him to remain silent and patient. He realized he'd been tapping his foot over and over again, and made himself stop. It drove El crazy when he did that. But she didn't seem to notice this time - she was too focused on Dr. Epstein.

The doctor put El's file down, and crossed his hands over his desk, glancing over at the three of them.

"Jane... you don't have cancer."

Mike thought he was going to throw up right then and there, feeling like a thousand pound weight had been lifted off his chest.

"What?" said El faintly, the smallest of smiles creeping upon her lips.

Dr. Epstein beamed at her in return. "You don't have cancer. The tumour is benign. You'll be fine. More than fine, actually - you're 100% healthy. There is no other trace of cancer in your body, not in your brain or anywhere else. It's a bloody miracle, though, if you ask me. It seems like your body has a superior healing capacity."

Baffled, El turned to look at her dad, then at Mike. "I'm... I'm going to live?" she whispered, tears welling up in her eyes.

Dr. Epstein nodded slowly, offering her a warm smile. "Yes."

Hopper laughed, wiping the tears from his face. Mike was crying, too. He squeezed El's hand, and turned to face her, overcome with happiness. She glanced back at him, and they shared a look of pure bliss. Mike leaned in to kiss her. She kissed him back, placing a hand on his tear-streaked cheek. Then she turned to her dad and he embraced her, pulling her into a giant bear hug as he continued to sob into her hair.

Mike had never taken drugs, and wondered if this is what it felt like to be high on something. He didn't have a care in the world, and his whole body tingled with excitement. He felt invincible, like nothing could make him come down from his cloud.

"Oh my god, Doctor Epstein," said Hopper, once he'd gotten a hold of himself. "I love you so, so much right now."

"Me too," added Mike, wiping the residual wetness from his face. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I kind of want to kiss you right now."

Dr. Epstein laughed. "Please don't, although I am glad to be the bearer of good news. Unfortunately, it doesn't always happen like this for everyone, though I wish it did." A look of sadness flashed across his face. "However, I'm happy that's not the case for you, Jane. Truly, I am."

El smiled at him, holding both her dad and Mike's hand on each side. "We have good news for you as well. We retrieved my medical file

from the Lab." She released her dad's hand and produced her papers from her dad's file holder, placing them on Dr. Epstein's desk.

Dr. Epstein looked at Hopper, wide-eyed. "How did you...?"

"Let's just say we have our ways," replied Hopper, grinning at El.

"Well, I won't ask questions," said Dr. Epstein with a sly smile. "But I'm very glad you could get your hands on it. Now, we can properly analyze the device and remove it, as well as your tumour. Preferably within the next five days. I'll have my assistant call you to set a time and date. I'll make a copy of her file, so we can keep it in our system, and give it right back to you once we're done with it."

Hopper nodded. "Sounds good to me. So, we're done here for now?"

"Absolutely," said Dr. Epstein. "As I said, we'll call you with the details. In the meantime, Jane, you get plenty of rest to get ready for your operation, and make sure you eat healthy foods that will boost your immune system. Citrus fruits like oranges, grapefruit... also green vegetables, almonds. Drink plenty of water."

El wrinkled her face in disapproval, but nodded nevertheless. "Okay."

"Any chance that eggos and ice cream are on your list?" joked Mike.

Hopper and El laughed, and Dr. Epstein looked at the three of them with raised eyebrows, not understanding the inside joke.

"Not a chance," he replied.

"You sure you want to do this?" Mike asked Eleven.

El sat cross-legged in the middle of her living room, with Mike at her side and Hopper and Joyce seated together on the couch. All three of them wore a look of concern on their faces as they stared at her with uncertainty.

"Well, I don't *want* to, but I think we have to, don't we? I mean, how else are we going to reach Kali? It's not like I have her number. We haven't spoken in years. I don't even know if she's alive," explained

El. "This is the fastest way. No - it's the *only* way."

"But honey, we don't *need* Kali to build our lawsuit," said Joyce, reaching for her hand. "We have enough evidence from you and your mother's files."

"I don't want you going back to that place," added Hopper. "You promised you'd never do it again."

"Unless I absolutely had to," corrected El. "Which I think I do. I think it would really, really help our cause if she could be there in court as a witness. Don't you?" she demanded, looking at her parents.

Hopper and Joyce exchanged glances, a look of defeat etched on their faces.

"Well, it certainly wouldn't hurt..." admitted Joyce.

"Look, I won't be gone long, you guys," said El, turning to all three of them. "I'll be in and out. If I don't find her within 5 minutes, I'll leave. I promise."

Mike sighed, taking her hand in his. "5 minutes," he repeated, looking intently into her eyes.

El offered him a comforting smile, placing her other hand on top of his. "I'll be fine, Mike."

"Okay then," said Hopper as grabbed the T.V. remote and flipped the channels until he landed upon a staticy, gray station, and turned up the volume. Mike handed her a scarf and El secured it over her eyes.

El closed her eyes under the blindfold and focused on the steady background noise of the T.V., concentrating on reaching the Upside Down. She hadn't done it in years, but it wasn't the sort of thing you forgot how to do. Suddenly the noise faded, and was replaced by an eerie, echoey silence. El didn't need her sight to know she'd succeeded, but removed the scarf nonetheless, finding herself sitting in pitch darkness. The ground had a mirror-like effect to it, almost like she was floating on very shallow water.

El rose from her spot on the ground, trying to keep her cool. She

hated being alone in the Upside Down. It reminded her of the first few times the Demogorgon had appeared to her as a child. She closed her eyes again and thought of Kali, desperately trying to sense her.

"Kali," she called out, concentrating very hard on the memories she had of her.

"Kali, it's Jane," she said. "I need your help."

Silence. Suddenly, a female voice echoed in the empty space.

"Jane?"

El opened her eyes in a flash. "Kali? Can you hear me?"

A bright, rainbow-colored butterfly fluttered in the distance, and floated right into the palm of Eleven's hand. She smiled at it, and her smile grew even wider when she spotted a female figure emerging from the darkness.

"Jane!" exclaimed Kali, running towards El. El started jogging towards her as well. Shortly after, they were crashing into each other in a tight embrace.

"Oh my God!" cried Kali, grabbing her by the shoulders. "You are so grown-up! Look at you!" she practically screamed, sizing her up from top to bottom.

El laughed. "You look so different too! What happened to the punk look?"

Kali shrugged. "Grew out of it. I have a real job now and everything." She rolled her eyes. "Boring as all hell, honestly." This gave El great relief. Kali's life of crime was essentially what had driven a wedge between them. She was very happy to hear that Kali had chosen a different path, and was staying out of trouble.

"I'm glad you're safe," said El. "I'm proud of you. Are you still living in Chicago?"

"Yes, with my boyfriend," replied Kali. "Are you still in Hawkins?"

"Yes," said El. "And I need your help. Bad."

"What is it, boy trouble? Want me to break his face in? We can do it together," pressed Kali, squinting her eyes and jokingly slapping her closed fist into the palm of her hand.

"No! Nothing like that! Things are perfect with Mike. He's perfect, we're perfect, everything is great," said El. "It's the Lab. Look, I don't have all the time in the world to explain it to you - my family is waiting for me back home. Long story short, the Lab inserted these radioactive devices inside our heads as children. I'm not 100% what's in it, but it's what gave us powers. It's what also almost gave me cancer," she explained.

Kali eyes grew wide. "What?" she asked, a grave expression on her face.

"Yeah. It's fine. The tumour is benign, they're removing it soon. But it was scary as hell, and it could have been a lot worse," said El. "That thing is pure poison. You should have yours removed, too. I don't want you getting sick."

Kali considered this information, baffled. "We weren't born with our powers...?"

El shook her head. "No, sadly. It's just another one of their tricks."

Kali scoffed. "Sure it was. Let's weaponize children, who cares if they get sick and die in the process?" she spat bitterly, renewed burning hatred in her eyes.

El offered her a weak smile. "My parents and I are going after the lab, if that'll make you feel any better. I'm talking a full-on lawsuit. I retrieved my medical file from the lab, and yours too. My doctor at Hawkins General needed it to remove the device."

Kali's expression softened. "You have my file?"

El nodded. "Like I said, I don't want you getting sick. I think you should come to Hawkins, and we should have it removed together. We could go through the whole healing process together afterwards, you know? You can stay at my place. My parents wouldn't mind. And

you could finally meet Mike."

Kali's bit her lip, and El noticed that her eyes were begging to tear up. "I'd love that, Jane."

"And maybe... you know, if you don't mind... maybe you could serve as a witness. When and if this whole thing goes to trial," added El nervously.

Kali touched her arm. "Of course, Jane. Whatever you need."

El sighed, relieved. "Okay. Great." She slapped a hand over her forehead. "Shoot. I don't have a pen for you to write down my address and phone number."

Kali smiled coyly at her. "Are you sure about that?" Almost instantly, El felt something in the back pocket of her jeans. She dug inside it, and pulled out a pen.

"Nice work, Kal," beamed El, and jotted the information on the back of Kali's hand.

"Might as well use our powers while we still can," said Kali. "It's going to be so weird being normal."

"Right," said El, feeling a pang of disappointment in the pit of her stomach. She'd been so preoccupied with her cancer scare that she hadn't really given it much thought.

"El?" It was Mike's voice, resonating in the Upside Down. "El, please come back."

"Is that your boyfriend?" asked Kali.

Eleven nodded. "Yeah. He's probably worried about me."

Kali made a face. "So cute. I like him already."

El laughed. "I have to go, but call me, okay?"

Kali took both of El's hands in hers. "The minute we get out of here, I promise."

El gave her one last hug. "Thank you so much, Kali."

"Don't worry about it," she replied. "That's what sisters are for, right?"

El smiled. "Right."

12. Chapter 12

CHAPTER 12

Kali was set to arrive in Hawkins the following evening, on Tuesday, two nights before El's operation. Eleven had called Dr. Epstein to schedule a same-day removal appointment for Kali, but he'd explained to her that it would be impossible for the two of them to get their operation done at the same time, seeing as she'd have to undergo a few tests at Hawkins General before undergoing any sort of procedure. So Kali would be staying at the Hopper-Buyers house for an undetermined amount of time, and Mike wasn't sure how he felt about it.

"So we're thinking she'll be here for, like.... for 10 days at most, but surely not two weeks, right?" asked Mike, twisting his head to the side to look at El, who was lying next to him on the blanket they had laid out in the middle of his backyard. They were sleeping over at Mike's tonight, and had decided to take advantage of the warm, clear-skied August evening by taking out some snacks and a blanket to stargaze, which was one of their favourite nighttime activities.

El pursed her lips. "No, two weeks sounds about right."

Mike's eyes widened as he propped himself up on his elbow, angling his body towards Eleven. "Two weeks?! So we're not going to sleep together for two whole weeks, and you're okay with that?" he asked dramatically.

El laughed. "Mike, it's temporary! Think of poor Kali! She's got nowhere else to go!"

Mike picked up a blade of grass and ripped it in two. "It just sucks that I'll barely see you the last two weeks before school starts all over again," he muttered, proceeding to shred the grass into a million pieces. "And work. It's a miracle Frankie hasn't fired me for taking the entire month off."

El offered him a sheepish smile. "I'm sad summer is ending too. But at least we get to go to school together. And we work together. So it's

not so bad, you know? Plus, it hasn't exactly been the best summer ever. Well it was, until this whole thing happened." She shook her head thinking about how crazy the past three weeks had been and how it all seemed to be so far behind them now, even though it wasn't entirely. But even though her operation was the last hurdle still to come, getting the confirmation from Dr. Epstein that she was cancer-free was like waking up from a really bad nightmare.

Mike grabbed her hand, and brushed softly it with his thumb. "I'm sorry. You're right. It's temporary, and I'll just have to suck it up. I'm just going to miss going to sleep and waking up next to you, that's all."

El propped herself up on her elbow and leaned in closer to his face, so much that their noses were almost touching. "Do you really think I won't sneak into your room when she'll be asleep?" she whispered, bumping her forehead against his.

Mike grinned as he leaned down to give her a kiss. "That's what I wanted to hear," he whispered back, keeping his eyes shut.

Eleven kissed his cheek and lowered herself back down onto the blanket. "You got me thinking about school for the first time in a while," she mused, looking up at the night sky. Mike followed suit and scooted closer to El, intertwining his fingers with hers.

"Junior year," he declared. "Two more years, then we're finally done with high school."

El turned her head towards him. "Do you think about college sometimes?"

Mike took a minute to look at the stars before giving her an answer. "I'm thinking I might go into engineering of some sort. Maybe computer engineering - I'm good with that stuff. Plus, technology's the future. I'll be able to get hired easily."

El beamed at him. "Mike, that's a great idea! You could go to MIT, or Stanford or something!"

Mike let out a curt laugh. "El, that's impossible. My parents are

already dishing out a bunch of money for Nancy to go to school in New York. And they're already setting some money aside for Holly. Plus, who knows if they'll even stay together that long, anyway? I might end up with two divorced parents, and no college fund. I'll probably end up at some community college two states away and have to take a year off to save up for rent and groceries, but hey - as long as we get our own place, I'm cool with it."

Eleven propped herself up again and turned to give him a disapproving look. "Mike, no. I know your parents don't have the most stable relationship right now, but I also know your college fund will stay right where it is, no matter what happens with their marriage. They would never take your money."

"I know they wouldn't, but they also told me they wouldn't pay my rent or tuition if I chose not to go to college here in Hawkins, which basically means that I'm on my own after high school. Because you know there's no way in hell I'm staying at the house any longer than I have to."

El bit her lip. "I'll start saving some money, too," she said, resting her head onto his chest.

"We'll find a way. We always do," replied Mike quietly, stroking her hair absent-mindedly. "I can't believe we already have to start worrying about money. It's such an adult thing to do."

El laughed. "I thought you couldn't wait to be 18!"

"Yeah, well, for everything except for that," he retorted.

"Well, I think it's fun to be thinking about college. We can worry about the money when the time comes," said El, drawing circles on his chest. "We'll have a nice spacey apartment, close to the beach."

"The beach, huh," said Mike, wrapping his arms around her and hugging her tightly to his body. "So you're thinking California?"

"Yes. Perfect weather year-round. You'd go to Berkeley or Stanford, and I'd get into nursing school."

"That does sound nice," he agreed. "I'd drop you off at school every

morning in my brand new 1989 black convertible Mustang, and everyone would be so jealous out on the quad."

El laughed. "So our money troubles suddenly disappear, and you've got a brand new Mustang?"

"My dream car, my dream girl, in a dream state," said Mike. "Don't take this away from me."

"I'm not," said El. "Never," she added, squeezing his waist tightly.

"We'd be pretty far from our friends and family, you'd be okay with that?"

El considered this. "Yeah. It's only for a few years. We'll see what we want to do afterwards, you know? If we want to move back closer, we can move back closer. If we feel like staying in California, we can do that, too. As long as we have each other, it doesn't really matter to me."

Mike pressed his face into her hair. "Yeah."

They made a pause on their conversation for a minute to enjoy the peaceful sounds of the crickets in the nearby field and the quiet drone of the electric lines.

"You never told me you wanted to go into nursing," said Mike.

"I've been thinking about it," said El. "It's not set in stone, but I think that's what I want to do."

"I like it," replied Mike. "I totally see you as a nurse. You've got the heart for it."

El smiled, giving his body another squeeze in reply.

"Do you think your family's asleep?" she asked him after another moment's pause.

Mike turned El's wrist upside down to check the time on his old wristwatch. "Well, it's almost one o'clock in the morning, so yeah," Mike replied. "Why?"

"Want to go inside? I have a surprise for you," she wiggled her eyebrows at him, a deviant expression on her face.

This piqued his interest. "What kind of surprise?" he pressed, intrigued.

"You'll find out soon enough," she replied vaguely, refusing to let up any information.

Mike was on his feet almost immediately. He had a feeling what kind of surprise it would be and he didn't want to wait another minute to find out. El laughed, and rose to her feet, folding the blanket while Mike assembled their trash and leftover snacks.

She followed him into the Wheeler house. They tiptoed their way down to the basement.

Mike took a seat on the old couch. "So... what's the surprise?" he asked anxiously.

El set aside their blanket and turned towards him, slowly unfastening the buttons of her plaid shirt. Mike watched her, mesmerized. El discarded her shirt, revealing her purple lace bra she had worn for him earlier in the summer.

"Oh my God," moaned Mike, tilting his head back behind the couch. "You kill me." He bit down hard onto his closed fist.

El giggled as she made a turn on herself, batting her eyelashes mockingly at him. Mike shook his head slowly, never tearing his eyes away from her. He wiggled his index finger at her in a "come here" motion. El ignored him and proceeded to do a little dance, folding the hem of her pants down with her thumbs to reveal a sliver of her lace underwear, and looked back at him seductively.

Mike couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed her by the waist and yanked her towards him. She let out a yell as she crashed on top of him, laughing wildly. He silenced her with a kiss, placing one hand around her waist and the other behind her neck.

He couldn't think of a better way to spend their last night alone together.

13. Chapter 13

CHAPTER 13

"Kali!" exclaimed Eleven, swinging the front door wide open.

"Oh my God, Jane!" shrieked Kali excitedly, dropping her bags on the porch to embrace her in a tight hug.

Mike hung around behind El, standing beside Hopper and Joyce. He had never met Kali, and couldn't say he was thrilled about her visit. Mike had always been negatively biased towards Kali, ever since he'd found out that she'd basically tried to turn El into a criminal three years ago. But Kali was El's oldest friend, and she seemed to truly care about her. He knew he had to make an effort. It helped that she was no longer living as an outlaw (or so Kali claimed), but he yet had to meet her to make up his final opinion about her.

"It's so good to see you! And not in that god awful place, you know," said Kali.

"I'm so happy you're here," replied El, wrapping her arms around Kali to give her another hug. She released her hold on Kali and motioned in the direction of Joyce and Hopper.

"Kali, these are my parents, Joyce and Jim Hopper," said El. Joyce waved at Kali, smiling sweetly. Hopper offered her a curt nod.

"Hi, it's so nice to meet you," said Kali, advancing towards Joyce and Hopper. She stuck out her hand at Joyce, but Joyce ignored the gesture and pulled her into a hug.

"Thank you for coming, sweetie," said Joyce, holding Kali out at arms length. Kali offered her a warm smile.

"Mr. Hopper," she said, turning to Hopper. Hopper wrapped his arms around her in an awkward accolade.

"Thanks for making the trip, Kali. You can stay with us as long as you like," he informed her. Mike had to make a substantial effort to keep his face straight.

"And this," said El, grabbing Mike's hand to drag him forward, and wrapped her arm around his waist. "Is Mike."

Kali squinted her eyes, studying him carefully. "So this is the famous Mike," she said coyly. "Nice to meet you." She stuck her hand out at him, and he shook it rather stiffly.

"Likewise," he replied evenly. Kali seemed to sense his reluctance.

"You'll be staying in my brother Will's room. Let me show you down the hall," said El. She turned to glance at Mike halfway down the hall. "Mike, could you get her bags?"

Mike gave her a look. "Sure," he replied unenthusiastically.

"Thanks Mike," said Kali, passing by him to rejoin El. "Such a gentleman." Was that a hint of sarcasm in her tone? Or did he imagine that?

He decided to keep his mouth shut as he juggled Kali's three ginormous duffel bags and suitcase down to Will's room. Upon entering, he saw them sitting on Will's bed, happily chattering away. He dropped Kali's things rather carelessly, her bags crashing to the floor with a loud thump. El and Kali kept on talking, completely ignoring his presence, and he got the message that he was no longer needed.

"I'll leave you two to catch up," he declared, a little salty.

El turned her head to flash him a quick smile. "Okay. Thank you for bringing her things, Mike."

"Yeah, thanks. See you later," said Kali, waving at him. Mike smiled weakly at her and turned to walk out the door.

"Hey." It was El's voice. He stopped in his tracks to glance back at her.

"I love you," she told him, offering him a warm smile. *Sorry,* she mouthed to him, making a subtle gesture between her and Kali.

He smiled. That was all he needed to make him happy again. "I love

you too," he replied.

"Aww, *stop it*, you guys," whined Kali, her nasally voice sounding like nails on a chalkboard to Mike's ears. He closed the door behind him, glad he wasn't being forced to stay and socialize.

"Girl time?"

Mike jumped at the deep voice coming from behind him. It was Hopper, cup of coffee in hand, leaning against the wall.

"Jesus," he said, placing a hand over his chest to still his racing heart.
"How long have you been creeping?"

Hopper took a sip of his coffee. "A father never creeps. He only watches."

Mike squinted at him. "Sure. Like that's not creepy at all."

"Listen," said Hopper, "I don't know if we should trust that girl. No matter what El says, that she's changed, or whatever. I'm still going to keep my eye on her."

Mike nodded, glad that Hopper was on his side about this. "Yeah. Me too."

"The last thing I want is the return of punk Eleven," continued Hopper. "And the attitude that comes with it." Again, Mike nodded in agreement. El had such a gentle, kind soul. He wasn't about to let anyone corrupt her again. Not on his watch.

Hopper took another sip of his coffee. "Why don't you make yourself useful and go help Joyce with dinner? I have to run down to the station. I'll be back later."

"Sure," he agreed. This sort of demand annoyed him when it came from his own mother, but he genuinely liked Joyce. Plus, this would be the perfect time to catch up on Will. Mike hadn't seen or heard of him since the last day of school, and he was curious to know how his summer was going over in Indianapolis.

"So, Kali, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself," said Hopper as he reached for the bread basket.

Joyce had prepared a feast (she usually went overboard when entertaining guests) that consisted of lasagna, caesar salad, breadsticks, and Mike's personal favorite - her seven-layer salsa dip with cream cheese and tostitos on the side. Joyce had insisted on tackling everything on her own, except desert, which she had entrusted to Mike. He'd very carefully followed the steps to her cherry pie recipe, and it had come out beautifully. He couldn't wait for everyone to try it.

Kali let out a dry laugh. "Sure. What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about your family," suggested Hopper. "Do you know anything about them?"

"Not much," replied Kali. "I never even knew who my parents were until today. Saw their names for the first time on my medical file when Jane gave it to me. Vikram and Saiyan Prasad," mused Kali, spearing a few pieces of salad with her fork. "I'm going to try to sense them in the... what do you call it, Jane?"

El finished chewing her food before answering. "The Upside Down."

"Right, the Upside Down. I mean, they could be anywhere in the country. My best chance is to find them in the Upside Down before I have to give up my powers," explained Kali. Hopper wanted to object, but he knew it wasn't his place to stop her from going to the Upside Down. Plus, she was right - it would be the most efficient way.

"Well, good luck sweetheart," said Joyce, offering her an encouraging smile. "I really hope you can find them."

"Thank you, Mrs. Buyers."

Mike picked at his plate. "El, what time do we have to be at the hospital tomorrow?"

"10:30," replied El. "Kali has her first meeting with Dr. Epstein shortly before my operation, so we'll all head out together at the same time, I guess."

Joy, thought Mike, as he scooped up some of Joyce's salsa dip off his plate with his tostito chip and stuffed it into his mouth.

"I'm just so glad this is all coming to an end. I say we all toast to Eleven's good health," proposed Joyce excitedly.

Mike quickly raised his glass of water. "Amen to that."

Hopper cleared his throat. "To my daughter, whom I love more than anything," said Hopper, clinking his wine glass against El's cup of water. "You make me so proud to be your father."

El made a sappy face and rested her head against his shoulder. "Aww, dad. Thank you."

"I couldn't have asked for a better daughter," added Joyce, reaching across the table to grab her hand. "You're such a good person, Eleven. We love you so much."

"And I'm so thankful to have found you, El," said Mike. "No matter what obstacle life throws our way, we always find a way to get past them together. You know how much you mean to me. You're my soulmate, my best friend, and I'll love you forever. Here's to spending the rest of my life with you by my side." He finished his speech by gently clinking his glass against El's. She looked at him with tears in her eyes and reached for his hand.

"I love you," said El. In response, Mike took her hand and brought it up to his lips to give it a soft kiss.

Joyce glanced at Hopper, looking like she was about to cry. Even Kali was getting teary-eyed.

"Wow, you guys make me want to find my family even more," said Kali, dabbing her napkin at the corners of her eyes. She raised her glass of wine. "To Jane. My badass childhood friend."

Everyone laughed - even Mike - and took a sip of their respective drinks.

"So, Kali," said Joyce, trying to alleviate the air. "What are your powers like? Are they similar to Eleven's?"

"No, her powers are even cooler than mine," boasted El, glancing sideways at Kali.

Doubtful, thought Mike as he chewed on his food.

"Shut up, that is so not true," replied Kali. "Jane's just being humble."

Mike was inclined to agree.

"I specialize in the art of illusion," she explained, taking a sip of her wine. "Whatever I imagine in my mind, I can project in real life. Like a false reality, if you will."

Joyce and Hopper exchanged glances. Even Mike's interest was piqued.

"Sounds interesting," said Hopper. "Can you demonstrate?"

"Sure," Kali said. "What do you want to see? What's your favorite animal or mythological creature?"

"A phoenix," replied Hopper. "Reborn from their ashes. Fascinating."

"Okay," said Kali, setting her fork and knife down. She closed her eyes to concentrate. Suddenly, a phoenix emerged from the kitchen window, shattering it into a million pieces. It flew around the dining room, wings outstretched, its magnificent multi-colored plumage almost shimmering under the kitchen light.

"Oh my God," breathed Hopper. "That's amazing."

"Yeah, it is," admitted Mike, not tearing his eyes away from the phoenix as it continued to soar around the kitchen and living room area.

Kali stretched out her arm and the phoenix landed on it. "Thank you," she said, gently stroking the bird's head. "I can imagine places, as well. Say, Times Square. An exotic beach." She snapped her fingers and just like that, the phoenix disappeared. The kitchen window was also like new.

Joyce clapped excitedly. "Bravo!"

Kali bowed her head and raised her glass of wine. "Glad you enjoyed."

They finished up the rest of dinner, and Joyce broke out the cherry pie Mike had prepared. Everyone agreed that it was delicious.

"Tastes just the same as Joyce's," proclaimed Hopper with his mouth full. "Nice job, kid." Mike couldn't help feeling proud at the statement. Joyce made the best cherry pie he'd ever had.

"Mike, why don't you help me with the dishes," said El. "Mom, I'll make you some tea," she offered, placing a hand on Joyce's shoulder.

Joyce placed her hand over El's, tilting her head back to look at her. "Thank you, sweetheart.

Mike quickly rose from his seat, happy to be getting some alone time with El, even if it meant doing chores. Kali got up from the kitchen table, on her way to go to the bathroom when a picture frame caught her attention in the hallway.

"Who's this?" she asked Hopper and Joyce curiously.

Hopper cleared his throat. "That's uh... that's my daughter, Sarah," he explained, visibly uncomfortable. "She died. Several years ago. Cancer."

Kali's face fell. "Oh my God. I'm so sorry, Mr. Hopper.. I didn't know..." she mumbled, setting down the picture frame.

"It's okay. How could you?" said Hopper.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to Kali. "Would you... like to see her, Mr. Hopper?" she asked him quietly.

Hopper's eyes went wide. He looked over at Joyce, who looked back at him, equally baffled.

"Yeah," he said. "Of course I would."

Kali closed her eyes. A five year old blond girl peeked from behind her, sporting pigtails and overalls.

"Daddy?" she said.

Joyce brought her hands up to her mouth, shocked. Hopper shot up from his seat, almost falling over his chair. He fell to his knees.

"Sarah?" he breathed, tears already running down his cheeks.

The little girl ran over to him and threw her arms around his neck, squeezing him tightly. Hopper began to sob, his face buried into her hair.

"I love you Daddy," said the little girl.

"I love you too, baby," he weeped. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't save you."

"It's not your fault, Daddy," the little girl whispered into his ear.

El was crying silently into Mike's chest and he held her tightly, softly stroking her hair, completely awe-struck by the emotional scene unraveling before his eyes.

"I'll always be with you," said Sarah, placing her small hand on Hopper's cheek. "And I forgive you, Daddy. I forgive you." Hopper's entire body shook with every sob.

"You have to say goodbye, Mr. Hopper," said Kali.

"I know," he said tearfully. He looked at her delicate face. "I have to let you go, baby."

Sarah threw her arms around his neck again. "I'll always be with you Daddy."

Then, she was gone.

Joyce was on the ground immediately, trying her best to comfort him. They cried into each other's arms for a moment. Then, he got up and walked over to Kali, and embraced her.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you so much."

Kali felt her own tears streaming down her cheeks. "It's nothing, Mr. Hopper."

"Call me Jim, please," he said, wiping the tears from his face.

Kali smiled at him. "Okay, Jim. I hope I didn't upset you too much."

"No, no," he said immediately. "If nothing, you gave me closure. I appreciate it."

El turned to look at Mike. "See, she's not so bad, is she?" she whispered to him quietly.

And Mike had to agree.

14. Chapter 14

CHAPTER 14

They showed up at the hospital one hour before El's operation. Joyce bought some muffins, croissants, coffee and orange juice from the cafeteria, and they had just enough time to finish their breakfast before Dr. Epstein arrived in the waiting period room to meet Kali. He asked her to come into his office, and El had gone in with her for support. Thirty minutes later, her consultation was over, and it was time to get El prepared for her procedure.

"It's going to be fine," encouraged Kali. "You'll wake up in 6 hours, and it'll be done."

"Yeah," said El. The nerves were starting to kick in, even if she did believe everything would be okay.

"She's in good hands," reassured El's nurse. "Dr. Woodrow is an experienced surgeon. And Dr. Epstein will be in the room the whole time."

El nodded. Mike reached for her hand, sensing her discomfort.

A second nurse appeared to retrieve Kali for her first scan. "Prasad, Kali?"

Kali turned to El and took a deep breath. "I guess it's never a good day to find out if you have a brain tumour."

"You'll be fine," said El. "We're both going to be fine."

They hugged it out one last time, then she was gone.

"Jane, I need you to go put these on," said the nurse, handing her a hospital gown and bonnet. "There's a bathroom down the hall. Fifth door to your right."

"Alright," said El, trying to keep her voice steady.

"We're right here, El," comforted Mike. "We're not going anywhere."

You've got this." He kissed her on the cheek, and she gave his hand a quick squeeze before disappearing.

"I'm terrified," declared Hopper when she was out of sight.

"Me too," added Joyce. "I'm shaking like a leaf."

Mike had to admit he was incredibly nervous as well. But all three of them knew they couldn't let it show in front of El.

"Guys, here she comes," he whispered.

"Okay, time to say your goodbyes, Jane," prompted the nurse. "The next time you see them will be after your surgery."

El turned to look at Mike, visible panic in her eyes. He wrapped his arms around her, and she squeezed him back hard.

"You got this," he said, "Then it's over. Forever."

She nodded, her eyes shining with tears. "You'll still love me, even without my powers?" she whispered.

Mike laughed, and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Of course. I just want you alive and healthy."

She wrapped her arms around his waist one last time. "Okay."

She turned to her parents, and Joyce and Hopper both hugged her at the same time.

"We love you, sweetie," said Joyce while rubbing her back. "Everything's going to be okay."

"We'll be there when you wake up, baby," added Hopper. "It'll be over before you know it."

El took a deep breath, trying to pump herself up. "Right. I love you guys," she called to them one last time before disappearing into the operating room with the friendly nurse.

It broke Mike's heart to see her go, and not be able to follow her in

for support. The three of them just stood there for a few seconds.

"We better take a seat," said Hopper. "It'll be awhile before we get to see her again." Mike and Joyce nodded in agreement. 8 hours, to be exact.

They headed for the waiting room. It would be a very long day, indeed.

"Mike."

Mike's eyes fluttered open. It took a second for him to realize he'd fallen asleep.

It was Kali, standing before him. "Hey," she said.

He sat up straight, stretching out his legs. "What time is it?" he croaked.

"1h30," replied Kali. "Where are Jim and Joyce?"

"Jim had to go to work," he informed her, still trying to shake off the grogginess. "Joyce must be here somewhere." He looked around the waiting room, but saw no sign of her.

"I brought coffee," said Kali, holding out a cup for him. "Wait... do you even drink coffee?"

"Not really," he said, accepting it nonetheless. "I've been trying to get into it, though."

Kali nodded. "It takes a few times. But once you get used to the taste, you're hooked."

"So I've heard," replied Mike, taking a sip. It was way too strong, but he decided to keep drinking it anyway, not wanting to chicken in out front of Kali.

"Did everything go alright with your scan?" he asked her, trying to be friendly.

"Okay, I guess. I won't know the test results for 5 days," she responded. "It's kind of a long wait."

"Yeah, I know, trust me," said Mike. "It feels like forever." Kali nodded absent-mindedly, her gaze fixated on the floor.

"I know it's hard," he added. "But try and stay busy as much as possible. It'll take your mind off it."

"And by stay busy, do you mean get wasted, like you did?" retorted Kali. Mike shot her a look.

"I was kidding, jeez," she said, sitting down next to him. "To be fair, it's not a bad plan."

"Just leave El out of it," he snapped.

"Oh come on, Mike," said Kali. "I know you don't like me, but do you really think I'd get her wasted after a brain surgery?"

Mike folded his arms across his chest. "I don't know. You made her part of a part of your criminal circle and tried to make her kill someone. Pardon me if I think your judgement on what's right and wrong is a little twisted," he spat.

Kali looked down at her coffee. "You have the right to hate me for that," she said. "It's not my proudest moment. But I was so, so angry back then, Mike. I couldn't focus on anything else. I was wounded, and I lashed out. At everyone, in every way possible."

"I was just so happy to have found someone from the Lab, like me," she continued. "Being three years older than Jane, I actually remembered her when she came out to see me in Chicago. I remembered our time spent together at the Lab - she didn't. She was too young. But she was like my little sister, even back then. I didn't want to let her go again. I wanted us to stick together. I knew nothing would be able to stop us, with our powers combined. It was selfish, and I see that now."

"I would never use her like that again. I didn't even realize I was using her back then," she said. "But I've changed, Mike. I'm not angry like I was back then. I've been doing therapy to work through my

issues. It's still a process, but I'm not giving up."

Mike looked sideways at her, but kept silent.

"I've been working towards getting my high school diploma. I'm working as a waitress in this crummy restaurant in downtown Chicago, trying to save up some money to go to college. I want to become a psychologist, to help people deal with their issues. It's worked so well for me. I want to help others, too."

Mike took a sip of his coffee. "That's... actually really a really good plan, Kali." Kali smiled at him.

"Look, I don't hate you," he conceded. "I just... I just don't want anything bad to happen to El. I'm kind of protective over her."

"Kind of, you think?" said Kali, laughing. "No, but it's cute. It's obvious that you love her very much. She's lucky to have you."

"I'm lucky to have her," he replied. They both took a sip of their coffees.

Kali broke the silence. "So... are we cool?"

Mike offered her a genuine smile. "Yeah. We're cool. Just as long as you don't try to corrupt my girlfriend again."

Kali laughed. "I promise, Mike."

"She's awake!"

"She is?"

"I think I saw her eyelids move."

"Eleven?"

El slowly felt herself regain consciousness, feeling like a thousand ton train had hit her in the face. She forced her eyes opened, and regretted it immediately. The white neon lights were blinding, and caused her head to throb even more.

"Mike..." she whispered, trying to find his hand with her eyes closed.

She felt him grab her hand immediately. "I'm right here El," he told her softly. "You did so good."

"Just take it easy, baby." It was her dad's voice this time. "Keep your eyes closed. Just rest. We're all here for you."

She meant to smile, but it hurt her face to even try.

She faded back to sleep.

In her dream, El was at her biological mother's house, sitting on the couch with her. The sunlight was shining through the windows. The whole room smelled like fresh flowers.

"You're free from them, Jane," Terry whispered to her, gently stroking her face.

El placed a hand over her mother's. "Mom..."

"They've got no power over you anymore," said Terry. "You're free."

And then El woke up.

El opened her eyes, and it was much easier this time around. The neon lights of her hospital room were dimmed, and her head hurt a lot less. She looked around - her room was decorated with balloons and flowers. Mike was sitting beside her, as were Hopper and Joyce.

"Hey," said Mike, leaning forward in his chair to take her hand. "You're awake!"

"Hi," she croaked.

"Hi." Mike beamed at her. "Welcome back."

"Hi, baby," said Hopper. "How do you feel?"

"Okay," she replied, sitting up in her bed. "My head still hurts a little

bit, but I feel alright." She reached over to touch the bouquet of roses that was sitting on her nightstand. "Did you guys bring in all these decorations? They're beautiful."

"We did... but it wasn't just us," said Mike. "Guys, come on in."

All her friends started pouring into her room - Max, Lucas Dustin, Kali, and even Will.

"Surprise!" they all cried. El jumped at the noise.

"Shh, guys, keep your voices down," instructed Hopper in a hushed voice.

"Surprise," they repeated in a whisper.

El couldn't believe it. "Guys, oh my God. You're all here!" One after the other, they came forward to give her a hug.

"Will, you're back," she said.

"Of course," he replied, taking a seat at the foot of her bed. "I wanted to be here when you woke up. I'm sorry I didn't come back to see you sooner."

El offered him a warm smile. "Don't worry about it."

"Well, well, well, quite the welcoming party you've got here, Miss Hopper," interrupted Doctor Epstein as he strolled into the room. "You're a lucky girl."

El smiled proudly at all her friends. "I am."

"I just wanted to check up on you, how do you feel?" he asked.

"I'm alright. A little headache, but I feel good."

Dr. Epstein wrote something down on his clipboard. "I wanted to tell you that everything went according to plan. It took us a little longer than expected to remove the tumour, and device, from your brain, but the surgery was successful. You're officially home free, Jane."

Everyone started clapping and hooting. El felt the tears starting to form in her eyes. Never had she felt so thankful and blessed.

"You're going to need plenty of rest, however," added Dr. Epstein. "You won't be able to do much for the next three weeks. I'm afraid you'll have to miss your first week of school."

"I'm sure she's heartbroken, doctor. Totally devastated," said Dustin.

Dr. Epstein chuckled. "You're a funny one, aren't you?"

Dustin shrugged. "That's what they tell me," he replied, flashing his pearly whites.

"Please ignore him, Dr. Epstein," said Hopper, looking over at Dustin with darts in his eyes. "You were saying?"

"We'll have to keep Jane at the hospital for a few days," Dr. Epstein continued. "Her friends can come visit during visiting hours, but only three at a time," he said, looking around at everyone to make sure his point got across.

"Got it," affirmed Max. "Can we stay for a little while, doctor?"

Dr. Epstein smiled. "Of course, just make sure to keep your voices down. You all have to be out of here by eight, when visiting hours end."

"I can stay overnight though, right?" asked Mike.

"Of course, Mr. Wheeler," replied Dr. Epstein. "I have a feeling that even if we'd kick you out, you'd find a way to come back, anyway."

Everyone laughed.

15. Chapter 15

CHAPTER 15

May 4th, 1989

Eleven finished applying her last coat of mascara and put on her pearl earrings, studying herself in the mirror. She was wearing a dark grey blazer and pencil skirt with black heels, and had to admit she looked quite professional.

A knock at the door. "El, we have to go."

She walked out of the courthouse bathroom. Mike was waiting for her in the hallway, looking as handsome as ever in his blue long-sleeve shirt and formal black pants and shoes.

"Ready?" he asked, fastening the buttons around his wrists. "We have to get inside the courtroom. They said 5 more minutes."

"Okay," she sighed. "You look great."

"And you look stunning, as always," he replied, placing his hands on her waist and leaned down to kiss her. "Nervous?"

"Very. I think I might puke or pass out. I'm not sure which one it's going to be."

Mike laughed. "Me too."

"Guys, we gotta go. Now," ordered Hopper from down the hall.

El took Mike's hand as they made their way inside the courtroom. It was packed with people they knew, and some El had never seen before in her life. To their left, she spotted Karen, Holly, and Ted sitting behind Will, Jonathan, and Joyce. The rest of her friends were there, too - Kali, Max, Lucas, Dustin and his new girlfriend - and all of them offering her encouraging looks and gestures as she walked by. Max gave her a quick double thumbs up. Kali nodded her head firmly, mouthing something to her that she couldn't quite make out.

To her right were the representatives and support committee for the Lab. They looked at her with varying degrees of indifference and annoyance. El decided to ignore them and look straight ahead as she made her way to her seat up front. The walk down the courtroom aisle seemed to take forever, but eventually they reached Hopper and their attorney, Benjamin Murphy, an old friend of Hopper's who had agreed to take on their case shortly after El had recovered from her brain surgery almost two years ago.

"All rise to welcome the honorable judge Catherine McKenzie," instructed the court registrar, and everyone rose from their seat immediately. A middle-aged blonde woman emerged from the double doors. El studied her carefully. Her facial expression was neutral, but not overly stern, which was encouraging. She wasn't very tall, nor beautiful, but walked through the courtroom with the confidence of a supermodel.

She took a seat behind her stand. "Be seated. Court is now in session in the case of Jane Ives-Hopper vs. Hawkins National Laboratory."

"The Court calls Ms. Jane Ives-Hopper to the witness stand," stated the court registrar. El rose from her seat, letting go of Mike's hand, which was almost as sweaty as her own.

"You got this, baby," murmured Hopper as she walked by him. "Do what you have to do."

El made her way to the witness stand, the clicking of her heels echoing loudly across the room. The registrar presented her with a bible, and she placed her hand on top of it.

"Miss Hopper, do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God under pains and penalties of perjury?"

"I do," she replied, looking straight at Dr. Owens, who was seated directly in front of her.

"State your full name and date of birth."

"Jane Ives-Hopper. February 19, 1971."

"The court calls the defending attorney, Jeffrey Holloway, for questioning," bellowed the registrar.

The attorney representing the Lab looked just like she'd imagined he would. A tall, skeletal, older man with greying hair and a very severe looking face. A walking caricature of almost every member of their staff. El wanted to laugh.

"Ms. Hopper, you were born and raised at Hawkins National Laboratory, is that correct?" demanded Skeletor.

"Yes," she stated.

"Your mother was part of the MkUltra Lab testing back in the early 70's?"

"Yes."

"A program she signed up for of her own accord. After your birth, your mother's mental state rapidly declined, and she quickly fell into a state of catatonia. You do understand the word catatonia, don't you Miss Hopper?"

El tried not to take offence at his condescending tone. "Yes, I do know what catatonia means. She became... unresponsive. Trapped in her own mind."

"That's right. Then Martin Brenner adopted you, and raised you in the lab, as per your own mother's will when she signed her papers resigning all legal rights to you," said Skeletor, waving some papers at her. "I understand you were a highly intelligent, skilled young person, and Dr. Brenner saw your potential."

"I was. I still am," replied El.

Skeletor smiled. "Right. Forgive me. Have you ever been mistreated by Dr. Brenner, Ms. Hopper?"

"Yes, multiple times. When I'd refuse to collaborate, specifically for testing, he would send me to isolation. Or his people would electrocute me. Under his orders, of course."

"Electrocute you?" asked the attorney. "Using what?"

"I'm not sure. But I'd feel the shocks hit me full force right on my skull. Perhaps they used the device they implanted onto my brain when I was child," said Eleven. "The same one that caused me to develop a brain tumour. The one I had to have surgically removed, two years ago."

"Do we have any evidence of that?" demanded the judge. The registrar brought on the tiny, two-pronged device and handed it to Skeletor.

He studied it briefly, a mocking expression plastered across his face. "This is a micro device used to stimulate brain activity, Ms. Hopper. It couldn't have been used to shock you. There are no electrical receptors on this. It works by nuclear force."

"So it's better to implant a radioactive apparatus onto a child's brain, then?" she retorted, not being able to help herself. "Sir, with all due respect, this device could have given me cancer, electrical receptors or no. My doctor, Richard Epstein, says it's a medical miracle that my brain tumour was benign."

"But it couldn't have shocked you, as you claimed it had."

El ground her teeth together. "Probably not, I guess. No."

He produced more papers from his briefcase. "These are drawings you made featuring yourself and Dr. Brenner, am I correct?" he asked, showing them off to her.

"Correct. I drew these when I was very little."

"It says 'Papa and Me' on four of them. Hearts, hugs, and everything... I understand you were close with Martin Brenner as a child?"

"I was," said El. "At least, I thought I was. That's the thing with mental abuse, Mr. Holloway. You don't know it's really happening until you're out of it., especially when you're a child. I thought it was normal for me to live in constant isolation, have no human interaction other than with doctors, and be forced to spend my days

doing tests to hone my mental abilities, because I never knew anything else. Until I escaped, and built a life for myself."

Skeletor paced in front of her. "Now, these mental abilities you just mentioned. I understand you claim to have supernatural powers, Ms. Hopper. Or rather, used to have supernatural powers. You claim they were made possible by this device?" He motioned to the apparatus.

El turned to look at Hopper and Mike. They both nodded.

"Actually, Mr. Holloway, I still do have my powers," replied El. Skeleton's face fell. This was their secret weapon, and it was working!

As it turned out, they'd been wrong about the theory that El would lose her powers entirely once the device would be removed. What it did, really, was enhance them. El could still perform telekinesis, but she could no longer, say, close an all-consuming gate to the underworld. But El had pretended that her reported the false news to the Lab, claiming she had lost her powers after the surgery, hoping they would build their case accordingly. And by the looks on the Lab representatives' faces, El knew they hadn't expected this. Their plan had worked!

"Would you like a demonstration, your honor?" demanded El sweetly, turning to the judge.

"Please," she replied. "By all means."

She focused on Skeletor's briefcase, and it levitated into the air. The jurors gasped. The color drained from Catherine McKenzie's face. The defense attorney checked for strings under and above the file holder. El made his papers fly out and dance around in the room, then neatly tucked them back into his file holder.

"My legal name may be Jane, Mr. Holloway," said El. "But my real name is Eleven. As in test subject number 11." She hiked up her sleeve to reveal her "011" tattoo on her forearm. "As branded at the tender age of two by Dr. Martin Brenner himself." The jurors murmured between themselves.

Catherine McKenzie looked over at El, stunned. "I've never seen

anything like that before in my life," she declared. "Truly. Is there anything else you can do?"

"Anything that involves telekinesis. You know, moving objects with my mind," replied El. "When Dr. Epstein discovered the radioactive device in my brain, we thought my... supernatural abilities were powered by it. The only thing it did, really, was enhance them. My friend, Kali Prasad, who was raised in the Lab as well, has her own set of abilities. You should see them for yourself, your honor. I'm sure she'd be happy to demonstrate." The chorus of jurors grew so loud, Catherine McKenzie had to slam her mallet down to silence them.

"Silence, please," she demanded. She turned to Skeletor. "Is there anything else you'd like to ask the defendant, Mr. Holloway?"

Skeletor turned briefly towards Dr. Owens, who was slumped down in his chair, hand over his mouth. He shook his head.

"No further questions for the moment, your Honor," he replied.

Catherine McKenzie turned to Eleven. "Your friend is in the audience, Ms. Hopper?"

El pointed her out. "She's right there, your Honor." Every single person in the audience turned towards Kali.

"I'd love to see what she can do," said the judge. "Mr. Murphy, would you care to question the witness?"

Benjamin Murphy rose from his seat immediately, seizing the occasion. "I would love to, your honor."

Catherine McKenzie turned to El. "You're dismissed for now, Ms. Hopper." She turned to the audience. "The court calls the prosecuting attorney, Benjamin Murphy, to the stand."

El caught a glimpse at the jurors as she walked past them. Most of them were staring at her with sheer fascination. Some, however, looked at her with a hint of fear in their eyes. Her attorney gave her a nod and a fraction of a smile as they crossed paths. Mike was beaming proudly at her as she took her seat beside him.

"You should have seen the look on the jurors' faces when you made his papers fly," whispered Mike excitedly. "And the reps for the Lab! It was amazing! I'm so proud of you!"

"The court calls Kali Prasad to the witness stand," called the registrar. Kali rose from her seat in the audience and made her way to the witness stand, trying to ignore the growing chorus of hush whispers as best as she could.

"Ms. Prasad," said Benjamin Murphy. "You grew up at Hawkins National Laboratory, just like Ms. Hopper, am I correct?"

"Yes," confirmed Kali. "Jane is my earliest friend."

"Were you also branded with a tattoo as a young child, corresponding to your subject number, as per Dr. Brenner's request?"

Kali flashed her "008" tattoo to the audience. "I do. As did everyone else who was born at the Lab, I presume. I never knew how many of us there were. They kept us separate - Jane is the only person around my age that I was ever allowed to interact with. I'm not sure why."

"And have you ever suffered any emotional or physical abuse at the hands of Martin Brenner, or any other member of his staff?"

Kali scoffed. "More than I can count. I was a bit more of a rebel than Jane. I would often refuse to cooperate. Brenner's associates would often hit me, spank me. Shock me. Among other things."

The jurors whispered furiously amongst themselves. Catherine McKenzie slammed her hammer down.

"Objection," cried Skeletor. "Prosecution has no concrete evidence of that."

"Actually, I believe we do, your honor," countered Benjamin Murphy. He produced papers from his file holder. "I have a copy of Ms. Prasad's medical file right here. It would appear that she was once plunged in water so cold that her heart stopped, and had to be shocked back to life with defibrillator paddles at the Lab's medical wing." The audience gasped and murmured. Mike looked around, pleased with their discontent.

"May I see that, Mr. Murphy?" demanded Catherine McKenzie. Benjamin handed her the paper, and she studied it in silence for a few seconds.

"Quite disturbing, indeed," mused the judge. "Please go on, Mr. Murphy."

Benjamin Murphy looked over at Skeletor with a cocky expression on his face. "Ms. Prasad, I believe you ran away from the Lab at the age of 10?"

"Correct. I used my own special abilities to help me distract the security," admitted Kali.

"And just like Ms. Hopper, you had your own cranial device removed under the instructions of Dr. Richard Epstein at Hawkins General?"

"Correct."

"May you demonstrate your abilities to the jurors, Ms. Prasad?" asked the judge.

"Of course," said Kali. She closed her eyes. A small dragon barged through the double doors of the courtroom. Everyone gasped loudly, and a few people screamed, including one of the Lab employees. The dragon circled around the courtroom ceiling, breathing purple flames. It made a fast dive towards Dr. Owens, and disappeared just as it was about to crash into him. Everyone in the audience - including the jurors - began to clap. Mike laughed. This was way too easy.

"What on Earth was that?" murmured Catherine McKenzie, completely awe-struck.

"I create illusions, your Honor. I can make you see whatever you wish to see."

The audience's hushed whispers rose to a low hum. Catherine McKenzie slammed her mallet down again.

"Truly amazing, Ms. Prasad," she admitted.

"Thank you, your Honor."

"Your Honor, I would like to call Dr. Richard Epstein to the stand for questioning," said Benjamin Murphy.

"Certainly," allowed the judge. "Ms. Prasad, you're dismissed for now."

Kali rose from the witness stand to return to her seat in the audience. The jurors stared at her in total amazement as she walked past them.

"The court calls Dr. Richard Epstein to the stand," called the registrar.

Benjamin Murphy proceeded to question Dr. Epstein, mainly about the effects of nuclear substances on the human body. Dr. Epstein confirmed that they were linked directly to the development of cancers and physical anomalies - on humans and animals alike - and provided evidence from the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster. Animals with six to eight legs, goats with two heads, and humans with varying degrees of physical disproportionalities.

"The Chernobyl victim count continues to rise," continued Dr. Epstein. "So many people have been diagnosed with cancer since the disaster. Some are developing tumours just now, years later. Nuclear technology can be powerful and efficient, but it's also incredibly dangerous, if used in the wrong hands." He glared at the Lab representatives sitting before him.

"And as a health practitioner, would you ever consider implanting one of these devices on the brain of a child, no less?"

"Never. The risks are way too high. Especially with long-term exposure, such as in the cases of Kali and Jane. As Jane said earlier, it truly is a medical miracle that her tumour turned out to be benign. Brain cancers are often fatal." He paused, turning to smile fondly at El. "However, I've never had patients with superhuman abilities such as theirs. Maybe Jane and Kali's... mutations have helped their bodies heal with time. I have to admit that their abilities are beyond my comprehension, your Honor."

"I think they're beyond anyone's comprehension, doctor," conceded

the judge. "I guess there are some things even logic can't explain."

"No further questions for the witness, your Honor," said El's attorney, satisfied with Dr. Epstein's testimony.

"I'm calling a recess," declared Catherine McKenzie. "30 minute break is now in session."

Most of jurors looked back at the Lab representatives with facial expressions ranging from disdain to downright hatred before disappearing in the back of the courtroom to discuss the trial. El thought she saw Catherine McKenzie offer her a glimpse of a smile and nod before disappearing into her own back room.

Mike turned to El and Hopper, looking like a kid on Christmas morning. "Could this be going any better?"

"Owens hasn't spoken yet, but I doubt he's got anything on us. We're nailing them," said Hopper.

El was hopeful as well. "I think we've already got most of the jurors in our back pocket."

As they exited the courtroom, they spotted Holly playing with what appeared to be a baby unicorn. It danced around Holly as she tried to pet it, causing her to burst into a fit of giggles every time the creature dipped its head away from her. Kali was sitting nearby, looking like she was having just as much fun as Holly was. People stood around them watching in awe, some even taking pictures.

"Mike, look!" exclaimed Holly excitedly when she spotted her older brother. The unicorn licked her cheek and Holly burst out laughing. Mike smiled at his little sister affectionately. It was one of the sweetest things he'd ever seen.

When Karen spotted El and Mike, she gave Ted a quick elbow jab, and the two came forward.

"Jane, I... I don't know what to say. I didn't know you could... I didn't know your friend could..." she trailed off, glancing back at her youngest daughter interacting with a mythological creature come to life. "I mean, I wasn't aware of any of it."

"It was kind of top-secret," said El. "But we had to risk the exposure to help us with the case. Our attorney figured the more witnesses, the better."

"Well yes, your... abilities are one thing, but I didn't know about your past, sweetie. The abuse. Michael never told us anything," Karen said, casting an accusing look at Mike.

Mike opened his mouth to say something, but Eleven cut him off to avoid a potential confrontation.

"It's not his fault, Karen. I asked him to not say anything. It's... it's kind of personal."

"Well, you turned out to be a wonderful young lady, my dear," interjected Ted. "And we're very proud to have you in our family."

Mike and Karen turned to look at Ted, their jaws down to the floor. Even El had to make an considerable effort to conceal her utter shock at the statement. Her father-in-law had spoken maybe ten words to her in six years.

"Uh... thank you Mr. Wheeler," she replied. "I feel blessed to be a part of your son's life."

Karen beamed at El. "We ought to make an effort to spend more time together, sweetheart. We've known each other for so long, yet I feel like I barely know you. Mike likes to keep you all to himself."

Mike shot his mother a look. "Mom -"

El felt the need to interrupt him again. "I would love that, Karen."

30 minutes later, court was back in session, and everyone returned to their seats.

"The court calls Dr. Samuel Owens to the witness stand," announced the registrar. Dr. Owens took his place. Skeletor rose from his seat at the defendants' table to question his client.

"Alright, here goes nothing," murmured Hopper. Mike and Eleven

exchanged nervous glances. El grabbed Mike's hand, and let out a shaky breath.

"It's gonna be okay," whispered Mike. "I love you."

"I love you too," she whispered back, giving his hand a squeeze.

"Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God under pains and penalties of perjury?" demanded the registrar while holding out the bible to him.

"Actually, that's what I came up here to do," replied Dr. Owens. "I wish to confess."

Mike and El glanced at each other.

"Confess?" repeated Skeletor nervously.

"That's right," continued Dr. Owens. "Your Honor, I've never physically harmed Jane Hopper. But I can't sit here with my mouth shut, and stand by this institution after everything it's done to her. And to Ms. Prasad," he declared, nodding respectfully at Kali. "And I certainly won't stand by that demented old fool, Brenner. May Satan have his soul."

The jurors murmured furiously amongst each other once again. Skeletor looked down at Dr. Owens, dumbfounded.

"Everything that Ms. Hopper has said is true," declared Owens. "We specialize in nuclear technology at Hawkins National Laboratory, but Martin Brenner was obsessed with the paranormal, and experimented with it quite frequently. He used the tools that were available to him at the Lab, as well as our government funding, to lead his sadistic experiments, and took things way too far."

"As current director at Hawkins National Laboratory," he continued, "I can honestly say I've never led any kind of experiment involving the paranormal. I've never mistreated any of my patients. We no longer conduct cruel, sadistic experiments. Not under my watch. But it's a part of our past. And I won't try to hide it anymore. Even if it means losing my job."

The noise in the courtroom grew unacceptably loud again, but the judge was too stunned to silence them. Mike, Hopper, and El glanced at each other anxiously. Was this really happening?

"Silence," finally ordered Catherine McKenzie. She turned to Dr. Owens. "Dr. Owens, I appreciate your honesty. I think you made the right choice, considering the undeniable - and quite frankly, sickening - evidence against your institution. All jurors in favor of Jane Ives-Hopper, raise your hand," she demanded. All twelve jurors' hands shot up immediately.

She turned to Dr. Owens with raised eyebrows. "Not that the jury's vote was necessary, given your confession, Dr. Owens. I was just curious."

Scattered laughter in the crowd. El thought her heart was going to beat out of her chest, and Mike was gripping her hand so hard it almost hurt.

"In the matter of Jane Hopper vs. Hawkins National Laboratory, I pronounce the defendants guilty on all accounts. Hawkins National Laboratory will pay a 10% fine of its net worth, or 1.2 million dollars, to the victim to cover for all mental and physical damages, past medical expenses, as well as any further medical retribution in the event of a possible health relapse." Catherine McKenzie slammed her hammer down for the final time.

Mike, El, and Hopper all looked at each other, stunned. The audience exploded into applause. Her friends stood up, hooting and cheering. Even Dr. Owens was clapping. The jurors rose to a standing ovation, as did the rest of the crowd. Except the Lab representatives, of course.

Mike shot up from his seat, and helped El to her feet, throwing his arms around her waist as soon as she'd steadied herself. El wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him back tightly.

He pulled her away and placed both hands on the sides of her face. "You did it, El! You did it!" he practically shouted over the deafening roar of the crowd, and leaned down to kiss her. "I love you so much! I'm so proud of you!" he told her, wrapping his arms around her once

again.

Suddenly, her dad grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into a giant bear hug. She squeezed back as hard as she could.

"I'm so proud of you, baby! I'm so proud of you!" He told her over and over. When she pulled away, he kissed the top of her head.

Her friends and family appeared at her side, yanking her in all directions to have their turn at hugging and congratulating her.

And El knew it was the best moment of her life.

16. EPILOGUE

Well this is it, guys! The final chapter! I can't believe this is the end! I'd gotten so used to working on this story during my free time. It's going to be so weird not going back to my beloved 100 page document. This is the first piece I ever finished. I'm proud of it, and I hope you guys enjoyed it. Huge thank you to everyone who took the time to review my story (or even follow it, or add it to their favorites!)

UPDATE

I just started writing the sequel to this story! I'm planning to update every 5 days. I'm thinking there will be 12-13 chapters to it. If you guys want to start reading it, here's the link : [s/13119473/1/Through-Thick-Thin](https://www.scribd.com/document/13119473/1/Through-Thick-Thin)

EPILOGUE

"Mom, that's way too tight."

"Just sit still for a minute, will you?"

"Mom, I'm telling you, I can do it myself."

Karen huffed, exasperated. "Will you just let me do it? You're leaving for California with Jane in a couple months, and I won't be around to do these things for you anymore. Can you please just let me help my only son get ready for prom?" she begged, looking like she was just about to start crying.

Mike sighed. She was right. And he hated when his mother was right. He also hated when she looked at him with puppy eyes like that. She knew how to pull on his heartstrings. She was an evil woman.

"Okay," he conceded. Karen beamed at him.

"And we're done," she declared, making one last adjustment to his tie.
"Go on! Have a look!"

He studied himself carefully in the hallway mirror. He had gone for a classic black tux and shoes. El had chosen a pink dress, and she'd instructed him to buy a pink undershirt to match, much to his dismay. But there was nothing he wouldn't do to please her. And wearing a pink blouse to prom was unfortunately one of those things.

"What do you think, Holly?" he asked his little sister, turning to face her.

Holly nodded at him in approval. "Pink is my favorite color. You look really good."

"Do you think El will like it?"

"I think you could go to prom wearing pyjamas, and El would like it."

Mike smiled fondly at her. Wise words from a ten year-old.

Nancy appeared from the kitchen. She looked Mike up and down, her face twisting up into a smirk.

"Nice choice of color, Mike. I never thought pink would look so good on you."

"Shut up, Nancy."

"Hey," snapped Karen, glaring at the two of them. "Cut it out, both of you. It's Mike's prom night. I won't have you guys bickering at each other. This is a happy day."

"She started it."

"It was a compliment. Jeez. Why are you so touchy?"

Mike rolled his eyes at her. "Whatever. Holly thinks I look good, and she's obviously the smarter sister. I don't care what you think," he said, grimacing at Nancy, then turned to wink at his little sister. Holly smiled proudly back at him.

"Suck up," said Nancy, ruffling her little sister's hair.

"Hey!" complained Holly, giggling, then wrapped her arms around

Nancy.

Karen beamed at her three children. "Oh, I have to get my camera! We have to take some pictures!"

Mike's face fell. "No, Mom, you really don't."

"Mike, I'm taking pictures on your prom day, and you're just going to have to accept that."

Mike groaned. He should have known. Karen ran up the stairs and right back down seconds later, camera in hand.

"TED! PICTURE TIME!" she shouted in the direction of the living room area. "Okay, sweetie, just one by yourself to start with, right here in front of the staircase," she instructed.

Mike sighed and positioned himself.

"Smile! You look so handsome!"

Mike tried to smile, but it came out more as a cringe.

Karen made a face. "Mike, you're going to have to do better than that. It's your prom night. Can't I get a genuine smile?"

"Mom, I like the more candid pictures. You know - the ones taken right there in the moment, not when it's set up I have to fake smile," complained Mike. "It's not real."

"Well, the pictures are real, I'm telling you. And you're going to look back at them years from now and wished you'd have smiled. So, big smile!" she encouraged cheerily. Mike barely had time to react that Karen had already snapped the picture.

"Okay! But give me a second! Jeez."

The doorbell rang.

"Thank God," muttered Mike, and ran to get the door.

It was Eleven. And Mike had never seen her look so beautiful.

Her shoulder length brown hair was twisted into a side braid, with miniature pink flowers tucked into it. Her dress was a light pink, and fit her figure perfectly. It was cut shorter in the front, revealing her perfect, tanned legs and flashy pink heels. Her diamond earrings and necklace sparkled in the sun.

Simply put, she took his breath away.

"Hey," she said.

"Wow," breathed Mike. "You look like an angel."

El offered him a shy smile, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Thanks," she said, taking both his hands in hers. "You look quite handsome, yourself. I like the pink."

Mike rolled his eyes. "Please don't mention it."

El laughed. "No, I'm serious. It looks great on you."

"JANE!" gasped Karen. "You look FABULOUS, darling. Oh, you look so STUNNING!"

"Thank you, Karen."

Holly stared at her, wide-eyed. "You look like a princess," she declared.

El crouched down to her level. "You're the princess, Hol."

Nancy appeared at her side and gave her a hug. "You really do look amazing, El."

"Jane honey, come take a picture with Mike - right here, okay? We were just getting started, you got here just in time!" ushered Karen.

Mike turned to face her, a curious look on his face. "Wait, why *are* you here though? I thought I was picking you up?"

A smile crept upon her lips. "I have a surprise for you."

Mike's eyebrows shot up. "You know I love it when you say that."

What is it?"

El took his hand. "Come outside. There's something I want to show you."

Mike followed her out, confused. The first thing he noticed was the 1989 black convertible Mustang parked in the driveway.

"What... wait... what is this?"

"That," said El, glancing back at the car. "Is a 1989 black convertible mustang, I believe." She turned to face Mike. "And it's all yours."

Mike's mouth fell open. He blinked. "What?"

El was so giddy, she looked like she was just about to explode with happiness. "The retribution money came in today," she blurted out. "So I went and got it for you." She clapped her hands together excitedly and did a little dance.

Mike just stood there looking at her, stunned. His eyes darted towards the car, then back at El. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious! Do you love it?!"

"Do I love it? Of course I love it!" he cried. He ran over to the car and touched it, just to make sure it was real. It even smelled amazing.

"You really got it for me? It's not just a rental?"

"I told you, the retribution money came in! Of course I got it for you! We need a car to get to California, don't we?"

Mike was so happy he genuinely thought he was going to cry. High school was ending. And in a few months, he'd be cruising off for Berkeley with the love of his life at his side in their brand new convertible Mustang.

All of his dreams were coming true.

He took three long strands towards El and took her in his arms, lifting her up in the air. He squeezed her tightly and he made her

twirl. She giggled, holding on firmly to his neck.

"Thank you, El," he whispered. "Thank you so, so much. I can't believe it." He ran towards the Mustang again. "I can't believe it!" he repeated, stroking the hood of the car.

"Now that I've got money, you better get used to me getting things for you. I'm officially your sugar mama. That's what that means, right?"

Mike laughed. "Yes, that's what it means."

El snaked her arms around his neck again. "I like it. It has a nice ring to it. Kiss me," she whispered. Mike happily obliged.

"Alright. Take me to prom, Mike Wheeler."